Narratives, Stories and Texts

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NARRATIVES, STORIES AND TEXTS

YIANNIS GABRIEL

The facts:

> A routine visit to the doctor turns into something more serious. An urgent referral to the hospital, a batch of tests, an anxious wait, a diagnosis. Testicular cancer.
>
> A company take-over, a restructuring. An invitation to re-apply for a job. Notification of immediate termination of employment and a compensation package. A black eye.
>
> A chance meeting with an old school acquaintance at an airport lobby. Instant revival of relationship. Offer of a job.

Three sequences of events involving different persons, or perhaps the same person, simultaneously or in succession. Notice immediately two temptations. First, to find other facts, missing from the descriptions above: Who are the 'subjects' of those events? What is their gender, age, class, race and so forth? What are the prospects of alternative employment? Who got the black eye and how? What kind of job was being offered? and so forth. And second, to find clues as to the significance of such facts: How advanced is the cancer? How did he take the diagnosis? How did she or he react to the letter? and so forth. The two temptations – finding out more facts, and finding out clues about their significance are not unrelated, since it is through the juxtaposition and sequencing of facts, their 'engagement' with each other in a plot, that meaning begins to emerge. For instance, on the very day he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, he also received a notice of termination of employment. Or alternatively – the day after she was offered an alluring new job following a chance meeting with an old school acquaintance at an airport lobby, she received the letter of termination from her old job. Facts, even those seemingly trivial ones that feature in game shows, invite being placed in a story, through the magic of plot.

Notice too, a third temptation – the temptation to silence. Why bother about a case of testicular cancer, a termination, a black eye or a job offer. Why indeed care in the light of personal and world events that cry out for meaning and explanation? Of course, if the protagonists in the above incidents happen to be oneself, or one's spouse (whether loved or hated or both), one's son or daughter or one's close friend, then the search for meaning may be burning. But if the subject is one of the anonymous thousands who are diagnosed with testicular cancer, are fired from their jobs or receive unexpected job offers

each month, then the search for meaning may all but vanish. The very requirement that meaning should reside in the facts disappears. They become mere statistics, data, information. The 'So what?' question is the abyss that faces every storyteller, as soon as a story is announced (Labov, 1972, p. 360). A story has been announced and a challenge has been set – will it be delivered or will it wither away in the face of the dreaded 'So what?' question.

Facts rarely speak for themselves – and never in isolation. Narratives and stories enable us to make sense of them, to identify their significance, and even, when they are painful or unpleasant, to accept them and live with them. Narratives and stories feature prominently as sense-making devices, through which events are not merely infused with meaning, but constructed and contested. This chapter will review their nature and mutations in organizational settings, their usage and scope. It will demonstrate some of their unique qualities as sense-making devices, contrasting them to other devices employed by people in organizations. Of course, narratives and stories are not the only discursive devices enabling us to understand facts, to link them with meanings, to make decisions or to cope with suffering and pain. The argument that will be put forward in this chapter is that, in spite of their current popularity among researchers and consultants, narratives, but especially stories, are relatively special events in organizations, capable of great sense-making feats, but also easily drowned in the din of information, lists, numbers, opinions, rationalizations and theories that saturate many organizational spaces, or remaining still-born in environments dominated by relentless preoccupations with efficiency, rationality and action.

There is another point to this paper. I have a strong feeling that, over the past ten years or so, the concept of story has become distinctly too comfortable. Ideas that once seemed crisp and provocative (e.g. "The truth of a story lies in its meaning, not in its accuracy", "We are all storytelling animals", "Stories are repositories of knowledge" etc.) have assumed the standing of unquestioned truths, ossified in time, in short they have become platitudes. I see it, therefore, as part of my purpose here to reproblematize the idea of story, to make it prickly, tricky and even dangerous once more. In particular, I would like to question some of the current enthusiasm with stories displayed by critical researchers, by pointing out that stories can be vehicles of contestation and opposition but also of oppression; furthermore, that they can be vehicles to enlightenment and understanding but also to dissimulation and lying; and finally, that they do not obliterate or deny the existence of facts but allow facts to be re-interpreted and embellished – this makes stories particularly dangerous devices in the hands of image-makers, hoaxers and spin doctors.

TEXT, NARRATIVE, STORY AND DISCOURSE

Current interest in organizational storytelling and narrative is part of a broader tendency of narrativization of organizational theory, that is an emphasis on language, scripts, metaphors, talk, stories and narratives not as parts of some

putative superstructure erected on top of the material realities of organizations, such as structure, power, technology and so forth, but rather as parts of the very essence of organization. This has challenged the 'standard platform' of organizational theory (Thoenig, 1998), built around the themes of bureaucracy, hierarchy and authority, and emphasizes, if not the primacy, at least the relative autonomy of the symbolic dimension. This is itself part of the broader linguistic turn in the social and human sciences – a tendency to view many social and psychological phenomena as constituted through language, sustained through language and challenged through language. Facts themselves can become 'denaturalized' (Fournier & Grey, 2000), the products rather than the instigators of discourse – note, for example, how 'the facts' in the first sequence described above change if 'testicular cancer' is replaced by 'malignant seminoma (survival rate 95%)'.

As the linguistic turn has been played out in different fields of study, the meanings of four key terms, namely text, narrative, story and discourse, have multiplied, merged and demerged, overlapped and fragmented. Attempts to order or police their usage through definitions have not been very successful. (For a good discussion of the definitional issues surrounding discourse, see Grant et al (1998)). Nor maybe should they be, since one of the qualities of the 'linguistic turn' has been a move away from adjudication by definition. Terms, concepts and so forth are approached not as immutable essences, but as elements of language in action. Stories are frequently used interchangeably with narratives, narratives with texts and texts with discourse. In this chapter, I want to advocate a different view, one that regards not all discourse and not every text as narrative, nor every narrative as a story. My reason for doing so is not an obsession with semantic policing, but a belief that viewing every type of text as story obliterates those qualities that make stories vivid and powerful but also fragile sense-making devices, obscures the skill and inventiveness entailed by storytelling and reduces the usefulness of studying stories in organizations. In particular, it suppresses those unique and inter-related properties of stories which make them effective as vehicles of both sense-making and contestations in and out of organizations – their ambiguous relation to truth or reality, their unmanaged and unmanageable qualities, and their vindication of experience as a source of knowledge against the claims of science and information.

Narratives are particular types of text. Unlike definitions, labels, lists, recipes, logos, proverbs, hypotheses, theories, or neurotic symptoms, buildings, clothes, musical instruments, cooking utensils or numerous other texts all of which can be 'read', narratives involve temporal chains of inter-related events or actions, undertaken by characters. Narratives are no simple signs, icons or images, still less are narratives material objects and physical movements (all of which may, to please Barthes (1966/1977), be regarded as texts but not narratives) – narratives require verbs denoting what characters did or what happened to them. They are not mere snapshot photographic images, but require sequencing, something noted by most systematic commentators on narratives (Bruner, 1990; Culler, 1981/2001; Czarniawska, 1997, 1999; Labov, 1972; MacIntyre, 1981; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984; Van Dijk, 1975;

Weick, 1995). As we move from narrative to story we are forced to recognize the increasing importance of plot, which 'knits events together', allowing us to understand the deeper significance of an event in the light of others (Czarniawska, 1999, p. 64f; Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 18-9).

If plot (involving characters, sequencing, action, predicaments etc.) is a crucial feature of stories, their second key feature is a seminal ambiguity -- the characters and events in the plot may be real or imagined, the product of experience or fantasy, (Czarniawska, 1999, p. 15; Gabriel, 2000, p. 239; Ricoeur, 1984, p. 150). This creative ambiguity gives stories a unique combination of two qualities, those of having a plot at the same time as representing reality. Stories purport to relate to facts that happened, but also discover in these facts a plot or a meaning, by claiming that facts do not merely happen but that they happen in accordance with the requirements of a plot. In short, stories are not 'just fictions' (although they may be fictions), nor are they mere chronologies of events as they happened. Instead, they represent poetic elaborations of narrative material, aiming to communicate facts as experience, not facts as information (Benjamin, 1968). This accords the storyteller a unique narrative privilege, poetic licence, that enables him/her to maintain an allegiance to the effectiveness of the story, even as he/she claims to be representing the truth.

Poetic licence is a feature of a psychological contract between the storyteller and his/her audience, that allows a storyteller to poetically mould the material for effect, to exaggerate, to omit, to draw connections where none are apparent, to silence events that interfere with the storyline, to embellish, to elaborate, to display emotion, to comment, to interpret, while he/she claims to be representing reality. All of these poetic interventions are justified in the name of giving a voice to experience. Thus poetic licence enables the storyteller to buy the audience's suspension of disbelief in exchange for pulling off a story which is verisimilar. The story then is a poetic elaboration on events, one that accords with the psychological needs of the teller and the audience, and one that requires considerable ingenuity on the part of the narrator. If the "So what?" indicates that the plot is failing to carry meaning, "Who are you kidding?" indicates that it fails to carry verisimilitude. Treading this tightrope between two questions which threaten the psychological contract is what sets the storyteller apart from narrators of other narratives, such chronicles, reports, myths, and films.

STORIES, FICTIONS AND SENSEMAKING

This then is where the skill and imagination of the storyteller resides – in spinning a yarn which at once makes events meaningful and maintains their standing as facts. This type of poetic work can be thought of as 'story-work', a work of creative imagination which does not lose contact with events but always seeks to uncover a deeper meaning in them. If I resist the temptation of calling this 'narrative labour' after the precedents of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and aesthetic labour, it is because story-work is both

emotional, in as much as it seeks to generate emotions appropriate to the situation, and aesthetic, in as much as it seeks to deliver a fulfilling artefact. o

How does story-work operate? It seems to me that in making sense of events, storytellers make use of a number of interpretive devices to which I refer as 'poetic tropes'. (Gabriel, 2000, p. 36) Each one of these tropes represents a way of either making sense of specific parts in the narrative or making connections between different parts. Eight such poetic tropes can be noted:

1. Attribution of motive – this is maybe the most important trope, one that turns individuals into agents, seeking to influence events and achieve their purposes consciously or unconsciously; motives cannot be established by observation, but can be established by inference;
2. Attribution of causal connections – here chronological sequence is turned into causal chain, earlier events causing subsequent ones; causal connections in stories tend to be simple and mechanical rather than complex, statistical and probabilistic;
3. Attribution of responsibility, viz. blame and credit – here an evaluation is implicit between praise-worthy events for which credit is attributed and reversals which call for the attribution of blame; credit and blame are attributed to single agents, minimizing the influence of chance and accident;
4. Attribution of unity – where an entire class of people or objects are treated as indistinguishable and, therefore, may substitute each other in the plot; any one person or object can stand for the entire class under such circumstances;
5. Attribution of fixed qualities, especially in opposition – here individuals, objects or classes of people and objects are seen as possessing natural or supernatural qualities (strength, intelligence, perfidiousness, cunning, sorcery) which are immutable, unless the plot accounts for their transformation;
6. Attribution of emotion – whereby individuals act in emotional ways and derive specific emotions from the events in the plot; emotion is frequently attributed in conjunction with motive;
7. Attribution of agency – whereby inanimate objects (such as volcanoes, machines, weather etc.) are seen as capable of acting in a motivated way;
8. Attribution of providential significance – whereby an event is seen as meeting the plot's requirement for justice or injustice, as though it were engineered by a superior benevolent or malevolent intelligence or fate.

How does the deployment of poetic tropes affect the representation (mimesis) of events by the storyteller? Within stories specific incidents may be accorded great emphasis, because they establish the significance of other events, other incidents may be silenced altogether or modified. Juxtaposition of different accounts of the same sequence of events suggests that, in drawing out meaning, storytellers use 'facts' in a plastic way, moulding them to the requirements of the plot which is itself a reflection of the needs of the audience. (Boje, 1994; Czarniawska, 1997) A plot that delivers verisimilitude to one audience fails to do so to another. This moulding of events to accord

with the requirements of the plot takes place in different ways; these may include the following:

1. Framing – here various events or characters are placed at the heart of the narrative, while others are placed near the edges or left out altogether;
2. Focusing – extends the idea of framing by according special emphasis on a single cluster of events or characters, diminishing the importance of others;
3. Filtering – whereby specific events or characters are taken out of the narrative, in spite of their closeness to some of the central characters or events;
4. Fading – whereby specific events or characters are brought in or out of focus for specific aspects of the plot and then silenced as though their usefulness and significance were extinguished;
5. Fusing – whereby two or more characters or events are merged into a single one, collapsing temporal and other distinctions;
6. Fitting – whereby specific events or characters are re-interpreted or represented in accordance with the plot.

HOW TRUTHFUL THEN ARE STORIES?

Such moulding of events allows the storyteller to construct plots and deploy the poetic tropes in identifying meaning. Does this amount to falsification? Undoubtedly, if the criterion of truth is accuracy of reporting. If, however, the criterion of truth is something different, then it may be that distortions, omissions and exaggerations serve a deeper truth. What may such a deeper truth be? The answer often given to this question is that the truth of the story lies not in its accurate depiction of facts but in its meaning (See, for example, Reason (1988)). Poetic licence and all the falsifications that it justifies aim at generating a deeper truth, one which gives us greater insight into a situation than the literal truth. "Let's create a fiction that is truer than truth" says one of the characters in Pirandello's Six characters in search of an author. But is it possible for fiction to be truer than reality? This is a question that has pre-occupied philosophers through the ages. In The Republic, Plato challenged precisely this view, in his critique of poetic and mythical narratives as long-standing repositories of deeper truths and wisdom. Instead, he proffered philosophy as a superior source of knowledge, subject to rational examination and analysis. He criticized poets and storytellers (even revered ones, like Homer) as persuasive peddlers of untruths and stirrers or irrational emotions, famously allowing them no place his Republic. At the heart of Plato's critique was his theory of mimesis – stories imitate the world of appearances which is itself only a pale imitation of the world of Forms, and are therefore twice removed from the real world of ideas or deep truths.

Aristotle in his Poetics sought to salvage poetry and storytelling from Plato's critique, by counter-posing his uniquely illuminating theory, namely that poetry and art imitate not the real but the general, the ideal, the deeply true. Mimesis in art is no mere imitation and carries no pejorative connotation -- instead of

imitation, it becomes representation. Reality as represented by the work of art is more true and more profound than that represented by the historian or the chronicler -- instead of imitating mere superficial appearance, it represents the essence, the general. A literal untruth, according to this view, may be closer to the true nature of things than a literal truth which remains superficial and mundane. Where literal representation accurately imitates the veil, the façade, the surface, poetry has transcendental qualities, reaching out towards the systematically hidden from sight, the enduring. It thus reveals a deeper truth, a poetic truth. Consider, for instance, caricatures, cartoons or painted portraits – all of these forms of representation aim at something deeper and more general, seeking to go beyond the accuracy of photographic reproduction. Could it then be said that storytelling too seeks to represent events in this deeper manner, reaching beyond the world of mere appearances?

I have long found the view that the truth of a story lies in its meaning rather than in its accuracy very compelling. I have now developed serious doubts and have come to regard it as a comforting but inadequate rhetorical gesture where proper argument is called for. It is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic view, which has always made psychoanalysis a target to criticism, that what matters is the experience of trauma, not whether the events causing the trauma actually happened or not. Likewise, if the experience described by a story is authentic, it matters little whether the events described therein actually took place or not. This view asserts the primacy of experience over other ways of establishing truth (Eagleton, 1996) above all else (including Plato's philosophy and science) as a source of knowledge. When the knowledge of experts is routinely devalued (and often for excellent reasons), knowledge from introspection, divination or faith are virtually dismissed, and facts become infinitely accommodating of diverse interpretations and spin, we are left with knowledge and truth from authentic personal experience, and the different voices that it takes (art, story, memoir, reminiscence) which assumes pride of place. Far from storytelling then being overwhelmed by other modernist narratives and texts as some theorists of modernity imagined (Benedict, 1931; Benjamin, 1968), storytelling enables people to discover a voice through which they can build truth on their experience, communicate it, debate it and share it with other people.

Yet, I think that this approach has weaknesses of its own and we have reasons to be skeptical towards it. Instead of representing the reflexive 'finding' of a voice rooted in experience, storytelling can represent a discursive strategy of dissimulation. Consider two recent imbroglios involving two memoirs, which represent the literary genre that voices experience. both achieved great success by combining the qualities of authenticity and verisimilitude that marked them as authentic expressions of people who had experienced extraordinary events. In I, Rigoberta Menchú (Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1984), a Guatemalan Indian woman (later honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize) painted a torrid account of the brutality inflicted on her family and her village by wealthy land-owners and the government in trying to drive them off their land. Subsequently, David Stoll (1999), an American anthropologist, sympathetic to the plight of Guatemalan Indians, challenged substantial parts

of Menchú's narrative. With the help of interviews with numerous villagers, Stoll offered convincing evidence (both narrative and factual) that some of the reported atrocities had not actually happened to Menchú's own family and that many of her claims were inaccurate (not least her claim to have been illiterate or that her father was a landless peasant). Stoll, more significantly, also challenged Menchú's contention that the Mayan Indians had been enthusiastic recruits by the focista guerrillas. Instead he makes a very convincing argument that they were caught between two armies, both of which bullied and brutalized them. Even more devastating was the discovery that Fragments: Memories of a wartime childhood, an award-winning Holocaust memoir written by Binjamin Wilkomirski (Wilkomirski, 1996) was a fake, its author being neither a Jew nor a Holocaust survivor (Maechler, 2001; Peskin, 2000; Suleiman, 2000). Both of these memoirs represent unspeakable suffering told by the presumed victims and generate powerful emotions in the reader – compassion for the victims as well as admiration for their courage, outrage against the oppressor. However, when we learn that the events could not have taken place as told, we feel that the authors have abused our trust, exceeding the limits of poetic licence to present fictions as facts.

Some have defended Menchú and Wilkomirski on similar grounds. Israel Gutman, for example, the director of the revered Yad Vashem and a Holocaust survivor, defended Wilkomirski on the grounds that "Wilkomirski has written a story which he has experienced deeply; that's for sure. ... He is not a fake. He is someone who lives this story very deeply in his soul. The pain is authentic" (Finkelstein, 2000). Others have argued that Menchú and Wilkomirski speak not just for themselves but with a collective voice, on behalf of a whole class of disempowered and silenced victims. Some indeed have seen this as a perfectly legitimate defence, refusing to acknowledge any difference between factual truth and a presumed symbolic truth (Binford, 2001; Gledhill, 2001). The mere contestation of testimonies like Menchú's and Wilkomirski's, according to such defendants, amounts to a denial of every survivor's experience, a virtual blasphemy. "I was there, not you", exclaimed Wilkomirski to his detractors, implying that no historical research, not even by distinguished Holocaust scholars like Raoul Hilberg and Yehuda Bauer, could cast any doubt on his testimony.

In spite of attempts to defend the authenticity of the voice of experience (with all its inexactitudes, artifices and partialities), it seems to me incontestable that incidents like the above (and numerous less well-publicised others) alert us to the possibility of grave breaches of the psychological contract between author and reader. In each case, knowingly or unknowingly, the authors have exceeded the prerogatives of poetic licence and ventured into the field of misrepresentation. Once this breach of contract has occurred, in spite of their possible literary and other merits, the fundamental credibility of such narratives has been broken. Verisimilitude has given way to dissimulation. The narrator is no longer a creditable one. Through an application of the trope of attribution of fixed qualities, having proven untrustworthy once, he/she remains so for ever – his/her narrative damaged beyond repair. This in itself generates a new type of literary narrative, the literary expose, which has

emerged as the antithesis of the memoir, establishing its own psychological contracts between authors and their audiences.

What is true of literary memoirs is also true of stories -- breaches of the psychological contract between storyteller and audience and subsequent discrediting of a story undermine our confidence that the “truth of stories lies in their meaning, not in their accuracy”, since the meaning of stories is altered and distorted, once some aspects of a story’s accuracy have been called into question. Instead, what we appreciate is that one means of contestation of stories lies in the ability to corrupt the credibility of the storyteller, by showing that he/she has broken his/her contract. To the two questions feared by every storyteller “So what?” and “Who are you kidding?” we must now add a third one, “Who are you to speak?” In addition to delivering meaning and verisimilitude, a story must be sustained by numerous hidden assumptions about legitimate and non-legitimate forms of representation. For a storyteller to say “I witnessed it with my own eyes” may be legitimate distortion for effect in some instances or entirely fraudulent in others. Poetic truth, therefore, becomes a product of this contract, which we may legitimately call ‘narrative contract’, which continuously defines legitimate and non-legitimate deviations from the facts, legitimate and non-legitimate forms of representation (Veyne, 1988).

Stories are subjects to programmes of truth which are continuously negotiated through the narrative contract between the storyteller and the audience in the course of the storytelling process itself. Storytelling then is liable to collapse for a number of reasons – if the audience are not interested or have not the time to listen, if the narrative does not deliver verisimilitude by failing to 'resonate', i.e. to touch those important wishes and desires that give it vibrancy and meaning, if the trust in the storyteller's ability, integrity or authority are undermined. For all these reasons, stories must be seen as fragile and delicate types of narratives, requiring much skill and sensitivity in order to be successful.

STORIES AND NARRATIVES IN ORGANIZATIONS

What can be said or stories and narratives in organizations that does not apply to stories and narratives in general? In the first place, I would contend that they have to compete with other sense-making devices which find, in organizations, a very hospitable environment. A person or a group seeking to understand an action or an event may very well resort to purely rationalistic explanations which do not require a supportive cast of characters, chronology or plot. "Why did Tourism International lay off a hundred people? Because, in the light of the current crisis facing the tourist industry, the organization was facing bankruptcy and it had to reduce costs." This may not be an explanation that possibly makes sense to those hundred people or their families, but it makes perfectly good sense to numerous others. In addition, many actions and events in organizations can be understood in terms of bureaucratic rules and procedures from which they emanate. "Why was X fired by organization

Y? Because he was found guilty of gross professional misconduct and, according to the organization's disciplinary code, he was summarily dismissed." This type of rationalistic and legalistic explanation may not exhaust the sense-making requirements of outsiders and often of insiders, but it would be wrong to dismiss them as either infrequent or inadequate – they perform their functions very well much of the time in organizations.

If stories and narratives as sense-making devices are far from hegemonic in organizations, they are even more severely contested as means of communication. Here organizations mobilize formidable resources which prima facie stand in the way of narratives and include rule-books and manuals, recipe books and reports, instructions and orders conveyed by word of mouth, paper and electronic means, circulars and so forth. Undoubtedly, these frequently invite narrative support or qualification (for a good discussion see Tsoukas (Tsoukas, 1998). "What is the story?" is usually an invitation to offer a narrative elaboration on what appears factual and definitive. Yet, on innumerable occasions instructions are followed, procedures are adhered to and information is assimilated without a call for such narrative elaborations. Even where symbolic elaborations are called for to re-inforce or to contest rationalistic or legalistic explanations or to support other information, they are not limited to stories and narratives. Various non-narrative linguistic devices can do so, for instance metaphors, labels and platitudes (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990).

There are additional qualities to organizations which inhibit narratives. Organizational controls on time, movement, space and on what people are allowed to say often inhibit the delicate and time-consuming narrative process. Many people work in organizations where they have little time for storytelling (as tellers or listeners) or where the emphasis on factual accuracy is such that storytelling is severely impaired. Even when stories do emerge, they frequently have to compete with official narratives and reports, frequently being silenced in a din of information and data. Numerous people simply do not have the time, the inclination or indeed the skill to tell stories. Many narratives are fragmented, cursory or incomplete – they are hardly narratives at all, only embryonic narrative fragments that may be regarded as 'proto-stories', but contain hardly any plot or characters. To all these difficulties, we must add a generalized narrative deskilling, a feature of modernity which was commented upon by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1968); while late modernity has rediscovered narratives in a wide variety of contexts and media, including journalism, advertising, political and other commentary, memoirs, etc. it can scarcely be said to represent a storytelling culture in the way that traditional cultures were (Gabriel, 2000).

All in all then, organizations are not 'natural' storytelling communities – communities where stories represent the only or even the main currency for sense-making and communication. In proposing the interesting term 'antenarrative' describe organizations, David Boje offers a similar a conceptualization of organizations (even though he defines 'story' different from other authors, such as Czarniawska, Watson and myself), as spaces full

of "unconstructed and fragmented" stories which have not yet been told (narrated) (Boje, 2001, p. 3). He argues, that in telling a story, story-tellers 'take a bet' that what they are about to say, in interaction with their audience, will amount to a story, though this is frequently not the case (since, as Boje acknowledges, most such tellings end up not having coherent plots.) Of course, stories and narratives do exist in organizations in different measures. The importance of stories and narratives in organizations lies precisely in their ability to create symbolic spaces where the hegemony of facts, information and technical rationality can be challenged or side-stepped. This is the domain that I refer to as the unmanaged organization, that dimension of organizational life where fantasies and emotions can find expressions in often irrational symbolic constructions. Emotional truths, half-truths and wishful fantasies inhabit this domain, which evades or side-steps organizational controls, and allows individuals and groups to seek pleasure and meaning in stories, gossip, jokes, graffiti, cartoons and so forth. (Gabriel, 1995)

The unmanaged terrains in organizations are not the same as the informal or unofficial organization. For the greatest part, these are part of the managed organization, patrolled and policed in more or less subtle ways as we are now well-aware thanks mostly to the work of theorists from the critical management perspective. Nor should all narratives, individual or shared, be thought of as part of the unmanaged organization -- such a view would fly in the face of the massive resources devoted to the creation and propagation of corporate fantasies for both internal and external consumption and the current fad in turning storytelling into another management tool of control and performance by those whom Sievers' (Sievers, 1986) entirely appropriately called 'merchandisers of meaning'. Those with power can attempt to dictate their own sense-making on others. They may use propaganda, officially sponsored texts which usually come not as stories but as slogans, logos, lists of values, images, etc. to this effect.

Some such manufactured and merchandized narratives may aspire to becoming stories, celebrated and reproduced by organizational members. In my experience, few become so. The majority of stories I collected from my study of storytelling in organizations were either indifferent to official narratives or sought to subvert them (Gabriel, 2000). My findings are consistent with Watson's who carried out a one-year ethnographic study of management at a British telecommunications company. He too discovered that

> the bulk of Ryland tales were negative ones. Almost totally dominating the stories told to me, when I asked the managers I interviewed to pass on stories they thought were typical of the ones told on the site, were anecdotes, myths and jokes with Ted Meadows [CEO] as the villain or butt. (Watson, 1994)

Due to their plastic relation to reality, stories make perfect inhabitants for the unmanaged organization. They slip furtively in and out of sight, they evade censors, they are easily camouflaged and they can rapidly join forces with

each other to provide mutual reinforcement and support. They are notoriously difficult to suppress since in doing so the result is to add to their currency and appeal. In this way, stories often cross the boundary between unmanaged and managed organization in different guises. The narrative about the man inventing adhesive tape in his spare time, or the loyal employee who discharges his/her mission against all odds may be adopted as parts of official organizational discourse. These may crystallize into organizational scripts, which may then generate pride, cynical derision or indifference among different groups of people. These, in turn, may reappear in the unmanaged organization with a new twist, such as that the erstwhile hero was subsequently fired or fell foul of management. Other narratives may cross the boundary in a different manner, not as potential supports for organizational practices but as open, visible challenges to such practices. Stories of victimized employees who dispute management decisions, of morally outraged individuals who become whistle-blowers and criticize their organization in public or of individuals who have the fortitude to confront directly their superiors intervene in the control-resistance domain of their organization and risk bringing its organized power upon themselves. Their narratives are no longer treated as stories, but they become claims, allegations, 'lies' and 'facts'.

Stories continuously test and re-draw the boundaries between the managed and the unmanaged. Within the context of narrative contracts, individuals continuously make assumptions about what can properly be discussed, the meanings attached to different texts, emotional reactions and so forth. Thus stories rarely emerge fully shaped. Their telling requires minuscule judgements depending on how the narrative is being received and engagements with questions, suggestions and hints from listeners which may indicate loss of interest, loss of understanding or, worst of all, loss of credibility. Stories are sometimes aborted altogether, when one of the listeners or even the teller him/herself quickly steers the narrative back to verifiable facts or to official stories, the precincts of the managed organization. At times, the mere presence of a certain person or a particular look may be enough to put an end to a venture in the unmanaged terrain. Alternatively a story started by one individual may be finished by another (Boje, 1991) or different variants may be discussed and compared. Stories in the unmanaged organization are far more plastic than their counterparts embedded in official ‘mythologies’, and frequently tend to mutate into other stories and merge with them. The unmanaged organization can then be seen as a kind of organizational dreamworld, where fantasy obtains a precarious advantage over reality and pleasure over work.

STORIES AND NARRATIVES IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Twenty years ago, it was not uncommon for researchers to complain that narratives and stories were not taken seriously in organizational research. One still hears such complaints though they are far less justified. The climate of opinion has changed. While some research on organizations has remained

indifferent to them, scholars have increasingly turned to narratives and stories for a wide range of organizational studies, including strategy, power and politics, emotion and rationality, ethics and morality, management learning and practice, aesthetics and identity as well as the more predictable ones such as sense-making, communication and culture. As was suggested earlier, much of this work has challenged the standard platform of organizational theory and has sought to reconceptualize organizations as narrative spaces, where discourse is, if not hegemonic and constituting, at least constitutive of what organizations stand for.

Numerous benefits have accrued. We have now become far more alert to the role of language in shaping perceptions and understanding, in discursive forms of control which operate in a subtle and often invisible manner as well as discursive forms of opposition and contestation. We have been able to observe and study emotions and fantasies operating in organizations and note that, far from being extra add-ons, they are vital in many aspects of organizational life. We have realized that much knowledge and information in organizations is disseminated and transformed through narrative processes. Our understanding of leadership and management has turned increasingly on the discursive resources deployed, which are every bit as important as material and human resources. Numerous aspects of organizational functioning which were either invisible or opaque have gradually come into view. All this is to the good.

Is there a downside to these developments? Until the events of 11 September 2001, I would have argued that the biggest danger of the linguistic turn in the social sciences (and organizational theory) was the tendency to deny the existence or the recalcitrance of facts along with the conviction that virtually any interpretation and symbolic construction can be made to stick. This seems to me less of a danger now. I am not at all sure that following the events of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, social scientists can continue to pretend that facts do not exist or do not matter or that they are dissolved into “intersubjective and emerging realities”. Facts exist, aeroplanes exist, buildings exist, fanatics exist, highjackings exist, planes crashing into buildings exist and thousands of people dead (whether in New York or in Kabul) exist – as facts. Likewise, bombing raids exist and people die, irrespective of whether they are discursively constructed as 'heroes’, ‘martyrs' or 'collateral damage'. We may dispute and quarrel about such things (their causes and meanings) till the end of time, but to deny their 'facticity' seems to me preposterous. We may weave ("emplot") facts into stories of heroism, martyrdom, betrayal, hubris, retribution and a thousand different meanings, but these are built on the facts. And facts are recalcitrant – they cannot be modified at will unless people are 'in denial'. It is a fact that Wilkomirski was not a concentration camp inmate, just as it is a fact that Rigoberta did not witness the execution-by-burning of one of her brothers, even if both of these individuals insist that they 'experienced' these events with the total conviction. None of this, of course, implies that people are not liable to disregard or deny facts that are unwelcome or invent ‘facts’ that are useful.

This brings me to the second and, in my view, more important danger – the increasing hegemony in the field of knowledge of personal experience, as expressed in 'voice'. While science has often been guilty of discounting personal experience and adopting a hegemonic voice of uncontested authority, we now run the risk of accepting the voice of personal experience as the uncontested and authentic source of understanding and sense-making. While 'silencing' this voice of experience can no longer be justified, neither can its elevation to unquestioned and unquestionable authority. As Moore and Muller (Moore & Muller, 1999) have argued

> "The reduction of knowledge to the single plane of experience through the rejection of 'depth analysis' and its epistemology (that allows for and requires a separate and autonomous non-mundane language of theory) produces differences of identity alone, but differences that are, in essence, all the same. The postmodern proclamation that there is only 'surface' echoes the earlier phenomenological claim that science is simply another species of commonsense -- an everyday accomplishment of members of the science community or form of life. … The world is viewed [as] a patchwork of incommensurable and exclusive voices or standpoints. Through the process of sub-division, increasingly more particularized identity categories come into being, each claiming the unique specificity of its distinctive experience and the knowledge authorized by it" (p. 199).

As Maton (1998) has argued, this leads to a reduction of knowledge discourse to 'knower discourses', which "base their legitimation upon the privileged insight of a knower, and work at maintaining strong boundaries around the definition of the knower -- they celebrate difference where 'truth' is defined by the 'knower' or 'voice'. As each voice is brought into the choir, the category of the privileged 'knower' becomes smaller, each strongly bounded from one another, for each 'voice' has its own privileged and specialized knowledge. ... In summary, with the emergence of each new category of knower, the categories of knowers become smaller, leading to proliferation and fragmentation within the knowledge formation." (p. 17) (Cited in Moore (1999, p. 199))

Instead of accepting all voices of experience as equally valid and equally worthy of attention, I would argue that it is the job of researchers to interrogate experiences, seeking to examine not only their origins, but also those blind spots, illusions and self-deceptions that crucially and legitimately make them up. Far from being an unqualified source of knowledge, experience must be treated with scepticism and suspicion. Joining the postmodern choirs of ever smaller voices does little credit to academic research. Disentangling these voices, understanding them, comparing them, privileging those which deserve to be privileged and silencing those that deserve to be silenced, questioning them, testing them and qualifying them – these seem to me to essential judging qualities that mark research into storytelling and narratives as

something different from the acts of storytelling and narration themselves. Deception, blind-spots, wishful thinking, the desire to please or to manipulate an audience, lapses of memory, confusion, and other factors may help mould a story or a narrative. It is the researcher's task not merely to celebrate the story or the narrative but to seek to use it as a vehicle for accessing deeper truths than the truths of undigested personal experience.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION – 20 THESES ON ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING

1. Narratives and stories are important though precarious sense-making and communication devices.

2. They are by no means the only sense-making or communication devices, competing as they do in organizations and societies with numerous other ones, including theories, reports, statistics and numbers, opinions, platitudes, images, clichés, acronyms, logos, and so forth.

3. Nor should sense-making be privileged in the study of organizations and societies, at the expense of other political, economic, and psychological processes.

4. Storytelling is especially tested in organizations, due to their emphasis on rationality, economy, time-keeping and formal control, all of which inhibit storytelling processes.

5. All the same, stories and narratives serve important functions in and out of organizations, including the creation of unmanaged spaces, the offering of consolations and the giving of warnings.

6. Stories may equally serve interests of emancipation, development and enlightenment and those of oppression, exploitation and obscurantism.

7. Stories do not eliminate facts, but are poetic elaborations on facts which reveal much about unconscious wishes and desires.

8. These elaborations are accepted by storytellers and audiences as prerogatives of poetic licence, though they can turn stories into misrepresentations, untruths and lies; the legitimacy of such prerogatives are constantly negotiated through a psychological contract linking storyteller and audience, described as narrative contract.

9. Not all stories are good stories and not all storytellers are good storytellers; storytelling in late industrial societies has become more fragmented and less imaginative as a result of narrative deskilling, itself the product of technological, political and cultural processes of late modernity.

10. Good storytelling requires considerable time and narrative skill, sensitivity and patience.

11. Not all stories deserve to be heard and often poor stories are cut short for very good reasons.

12. Stories involve plots and characters, generate emotion and may be the product of fantasy or experience.

13. Stories and narratives have careers -- they develop, they split, they unite, they mutate and they crystallize.

14. What remains relatively constant through such careers are the characters and the plots; to a much lesser extent, the emotions and symbolism.

15. The researcher's own accounts may assume many forms, including theories, statistics, narratives, reports, as well as stories.

16. Such stories, like other stories, are based on interpretations of narrative material; but the researcher's interpretations are of a different order (neither better nor worse) than those of the storyteller; the former are analytic interpretations aimed at uncovering the deeper meanings of a narrative, the latter are poetic interpretations seeking to infuse facts with meaning.

17. While experience is one of the two major sources of stories (the other being imagination), it is not an undisputed and unproblematic source of knowledge; much experience is the product of wish-fulfilling and other illusions which is what makes stories and narratives powerful avenues towards knowledge but not parcels of knowledge.

18. Unlike storytellers and narrators, researchers cannot disregard the facts or pretend that facts do not exist or matter – the same story has entirely different meanings, depending on whether its narrative foundation is factual or imaginary (Cf. Hoaxes and imbroglios like Wilkomirski).

19. All the same, researchers may become fellow travellers on stories and narratives, suspending disbelief or forensic tendencies and concentrating on symbolism and meaning.

20. It is inevitable and natural that each person privileges his/her own stories and those of their friends, allies and companions over those of others; it takes great feats of courage and fortitude to be able to engage with stories fundamentally at odds with one's own.

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