

Guest editorial 6.1

Paris, art, aesthetics, work and the unconscious

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ABSTRACT

This is a guest editorial to the TAMARA JOURNAL special issue, *Art & aesthetics of the unconscious*.

Ah, Paris, often regarded as a city of romance, a city of culture, a city that gave rise to numerous art movements and as a city known for its' art -- whether that be in its galleries, through the artwork for sale from the artists on the Left Bank or the sculptures that line the streets. The authors of this introduction to this special issue are reflecting, or reminiscing, about a recent visit to Paris for this was the city that played host to *The Second Art of Management and Organisation Conference*. It was at this conference that we were the convenors of a stream entitled: "The Art and Aesthetics of the Unconscious".

During the conference, attendees were treated to some splendid 'cultural' experiences such as being given a guided tour of the Pompidou and a river dinner trip along the Seine. Of course, many conference attendees did some of the tourist-type things such as a visit to the Louvre, the Rodin Sculpture Museum, the Eiffel tower, the Arc de Triomphe etc. Paris is also known for its bookshops. We noted in the front window of some bookshops, along with the latest best seller *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, were books on psychoanalysis. Evidence in the long-standing interest in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in France could be seen not only in the bookshops, but also in the variety of Institutes of Psychotherapies that are located in Paris. Our front cover shows the entrance to one such Institute, namely the *Institute for Psychotherapy*. It is in such a

context that Paris might appear to be a very appropriate setting for a conference stream that is, in part, is about the conjunction of art and exploring the depths of the unconscious.

The papers in this volume are some of the papers presented to this conference in Paris. Readers of this journal might be aware that this is the second special issue we have edited on the topic of art and aesthetics. The previous special issue was entitled "Art and aesthetics at work" (Carr & Hancock, 2002). The contributions to that volume also came from a conference -- the *Second International Critical Management Studies Conference*, held at the University of Manchester in July 2001. Some of those papers were to subsequently appear in an edited book volume also entitled *Art and aesthetics at work* (see Carr & Hancock, 2003). This volume is slightly different in its gaze, in as much as contributors address the extent to which an awareness and sensitivity to the relationship between art (and/or aesthetics) and the *unconscious* may enable us to develop a deeper and critical understanding of the organizational landscape. The emphasis upon the significance of the unconscious makes this volume different to our earlier edited volumes and, as an introduction to this new volume, we need to initially say something about the realm of the unconscious and the linkages with art and aesthetics before then making the case for how this has relevance to our thinking about work organizations.

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Art, aesthetics and the unconscious

Sigmund Freud is often credited with the discovery of the unconscious. However, Freud did not discover the unconscious but was amongst the first, if not the first, to suggest that the unconscious was a source of motivation and an active mind's way of hiding thoughts and desires from awareness.

The prevailing wisdom in the late 19th century was that the unconscious was "brain activity unaccompanied by mental activity" (Hewett, 1889, pp. 32-33). At that time, some viewed the realm of the unconscious as residual brain activity and as a passive or less active state of being, while some others thought the unconscious to be the entity responsible for paranormal or spiritual experiences.

Commencing with his publication *The interpretation of dreams* (1900/1986), Freud maintained that, akin to the proverbial iceberg, the unconscious was the subterranean strata of the psyche (or 'mind') that comprised previous experiences, memories, feelings and urges that were hidden from active awareness by defence mechanism such as repression and other psychodynamic processes. Also akin to the proverbial iceberg, Freud argued that it was the unconscious that was responsible for much of the mental activity that became manifest in human behaviour. Now, of course, much of the vocabulary Freud invented and used to describe the psyche has become part of everyday vernacular -- including words and phrases such as; libido; repression; regression; projection; sublimation; id; identification; ego; super-ego; Oedipus and Electra complex; free association; slip-of-the-tongue (Freudian slip); cathexis; and psychosexual stages. The majority of this vocabulary was coined in reference to the unconscious and, in so doing, was to reveal that the unconscious had structure, order and a very tangible role in the generation of meaning and behaviour. Indeed, in the context of writing the *Foreword* to a volume that

celebrates the anniversary of *The interpretation of dreams*, August Ruhs (2000) nicely captures this understanding of the unconscious when he argues:

The unconscious is neither amorphous nor is it a bubbling kettle of unbridled passions, but it has structure and order and is composed of a peculiar pictorial language in whose forms the reality of the drive pours out. (p. 8)

The manner in which the unconscious was related to the realms of art and aesthetics was, for Freud, multi-stranded. In the exploration of dreams, the images were to be scrutinised or interrogated in terms of their manifest and latent content. Were there elements of the dream that should be interpreted symbolically, and/or was the dream as a whole to be interpreted symbolically? The 'artwork' in the dream had to be 'worked-through' with each individual, as an individual, to understand how particular associations might be related to repressed feelings and experiences. In "dream-work", as Freud (1900/1986) dubbed it, unconscious processes (condensation, displacement and representation) were responsible for initially disguising latent unconscious content. Once the dream had been acknowledged as an object of perception, Freud noted that a further process may come into play, that of secondary revisionism. This is a process where the conscious rational aspect of the mind may attempt to put the content into some semblance of order and coherence that the content did not originally possess. Of course it is difficult to free ourselves from or escape the conceptual categories and processes of rationality that we so readily engage to impose some order to 'make sense' of a realm that at first glance appears 'foreign'.

In dreams, the 'artwork', pictorial representations and the aesthetic experience were all possible symbolic clues of the content of the unconscious. Like dreams, Freud also recognised that artworks themselves not only contain manifest content, but also may contain latent content about the

artist and the cultural context in which the artwork was produced. Those who subsequently seek to interpret the art may also, through processes such as projective identification, disclose aspects of their own unconscious. Freud examined possible symbolism in some of the art of Leonardo Da Vinci (1910/1985) and that of Michelangelo (Freud, 1914/1985) and in so doing offered some interpretation of the unconscious of the artists and, to a lesser extent, a 'reading' of the culture context of the artworks (see also Adams & Szaluta, 1996). However, it needs to be underlined here that Freud did not offer an interpretation simply on the basis of the artwork itself, but in the context of written accounts of aspects of the life of these artists.

One of Freud's legacies has been to alert us to how the fantastical and often deeply disturbing imagery, sounds and structures provide an alternative and, often, critical means of understanding the world and the relationship we hold to it. Moreover, Freud and those who subsequently followed him in explicating the significance of the unconscious alert us to how our culture is littered with artistic artefacts that appear to play out the primary psychodynamic processes that underpin the emergence of human subjectivity more generally.

Art, aesthetics, the unconscious and the study of work organizations

The connection of art, aesthetics, the unconscious and the study of work organizations is one that cannot be simply captured as a simple single relationship. One reading of the connection is to contemplate how art and aesthetics reflect an unconscious that may reveal novel and informative insights into the structuring and processes of work organizations. Yet another reading of the relationship is to understand the presence of art and aesthetics in organizations and how that presence carries symbolic meaning.

In the first of these 'readings' of the relationship of art, aesthetics and the unconscious with activities of organizations, an epistemological framework and heuristic emerges such that we are able better informed and conscious of the less cognitive and rational experiences in organizations. Resonant, in many respects with the actual practice of psychoanalysis, a case is made in a number of the contributions to this special issue, that the realms of art and aesthetics represent a different way of knowing and understanding of human existence and experience. Thus, just as the great twentieth century French impressionist painters employed the aesthetic medium of paint, and a recognition of the transient character of light and colour in order to present a fuller understanding of visual phenomena, the heuristic potential in this approach is such that we are afforded an opportunity to reconsider the forms of 'logic' that we have engaged in our study of organizations, offering perhaps new insights and revelations as to their qualities and practice.

In the second of the aforementioned 'readings' of the relationship of art, aesthetics and the unconscious with activities of organizations, the Arc de Triomphe could be thought of as just such an example. Commenced in 1806 at the 'request' of Napoleon, the Arc de Triomphe was built to commemorate the victories of his army and to exalt the French people to greatness. It was the Arc of Constantine in Rome that was the inspiration for Napoleon's commissioning of such a structure. The building of such a structure was used by Napoleon to urge his army onto further quests with a, often cited, promise to his troops that "You will return home through archs of triumph". While Wellington in 1815 at Waterloo put something of a dampener on the realisation of this promise, the Arc has continued to hold symbolic and inspirational significance. Following World War 1, the body of the unknown soldier was laid to rest in a vault beneath the structure as a representation of the 1, 500, 000 soldiers who died in that battle. A flame of remembrance continues to

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burn above this tomb and on national days of significance a flag adorns this structure. Edifices in modern organizations may not be so grand as the Arc de Triomphe. As we will see in this special issue, we nonetheless find the architecture of organization structures and objects within organizations with both overt and more latent messages and meaning regarding the specific organization of labour and how labour is to regard itself in relation to that organization.

These two broad approaches or readings of the relationship of art, aesthetics and the unconscious with activities of organizations can be illustrated with a variety of examples. At this juncture a brief overview of the papers in this special issue provides such examples and simultaneously gives our reader an idea of what can be expected in the papers that follow.

About the papers in this special issue

In our call for papers, for both the Paris conference and this special issue, we requested that contributors papers that are concerned to explore the extent to which an awareness and sensitivity to the relationship between art and the unconscious may enable us to develop a deeper and critical understanding of the organizational landscape. We noted that the call for the special issue is, by its very nature, broad in its scope and invites a diverse range of contributions as possible. However, suggested themes included:

- The organization as dreamscape or dreamscape as organization;
- Organizational storytelling and the unconscious realm of mythology;
- The psychodynamics of everyday organizational performances;
- Perversity and the erotic art of organizing;
- Organizational rituals and the enactment of death and desire;
- The unconscious as a source of aesthetic insight; and,

- The surreal avant-garde as critical optic.

The contributions that came from this call, and comprise this special issue, responded to some of these themes while raising some others.

The first paper in this issue is by Adrian Carr and he did respond to the “critical optic” that art affords us in terms of philosophical reflection. Drawing firmly upon the work of Herbert Marcuse and the work of other Frankfurt School scholars, Carr revisits and extends some of the themes in his earlier work in which he has commented upon: (a) the manner in which art can be considered as a form of language; (b) the manner in which art carries critical content; and (c) how the discourse of organizational studies is now, albeit unwittingly, carrying a contemporary evocation of surrealist art in the form of postmodernist theorizing. In this paper he expands upon the manner in which the surrealists created an “estrangement effect” in those who gazed upon their work. One the one hand art carries resemblance, i.e. it is mimetic and induces mimetic behaviour in those who view, listen and experience the work of the artist. On the other hand, art has an enigmatic face in as much as it carries discrepancy between projected images and ‘text’ and their actuality. It is this enigmatic face that is the critical element carried by works of art which, for Marcuse, represents *The Great Refusal*. This was a refusal to totalizing forms of logic and was an opportunity to re-present and induce critical reflection. In the work of the surrealists we have an example of a somewhat exaggerated expression of the enigmatic face of art in which the aim of the work was to create an “estrangement-effect” — a form of discomfort or shock that causes those who experience the work to reconsider the manner in which they have previously apprehended the association of objects and ideas. Much of the ‘reaction’ is emotional and in the realm of the unconscious elements of which then becomes an ‘object’ to now be examined.

Carr makes the suggestion that the field of organization and management studies has much to learn from the world of art and from the surrealist movement in particular. In making his case he notes some of the parallels between the work of the surrealists and that of the emerging postmodernist approach to those fields of organisation and management studies.

The heuristic emphasis in the paper by Carr is also carried in many of the papers that follow. The paper by Jill Westwood firmly approaches the connection of the unconscious with work organizations by employing the 'making' of art as a medium for unconscious expression. Westwood, a qualified Art Therapist, presents the outcomes of an experiential workshop at the conference in which participants were requested to "picture their organization" and make a response in the production of a piece of artwork using art materials of their own choosing. In Westwood's words "it was intended to visually place organizations on the 'couch'". Some of the images produced in that workshop are reproduced in her paper as are some of the participants' own words as to the associations they made with the images. Westwood reports that some participants were surprised by the images they produced and also the associations they subsequently made with the images. The unconscious may be more accessible as a projection through pictures than simply words by themselves. Westwood argues that art therapy might pose a useful intervention to surface unconscious material or psychodynamics of the organization that in turn may help in gaining insight into the organization and to shape constructive responses.

While the discussion of the unconscious has, thus far, drawn particularly on the work of Freud, the paper by David Russell draws upon the work of Carl Jung to make sense of some recent research into leadership development. Jung suggested that Freud's conception of the unconscious is really that of the personal part or 'layer' of the unconscious and that there was in fact a

deeper 'layer' which Jung called the collective unconscious. It is this collective unconscious that is shared and in common with all humans and contains primordial images and ideas that become manifest in fantasies, dreams, myths and emotional responses to the world around us. It was this common pattern of apprehending the world that Jung called archetypes. Russell uses such common images and the imagery embedded in myths to reveal not only the issues that arise as problems in the corporation being studied, but also to suggest possible solutions and directions for organizational and leadership reform.

Astrid Kersten also considers the matter of organizational reform, but this time in respect to neurotic tendencies that are expressed in the structuring and culture of organizations. Kersten finds it helpful to consider organizational experience in terms of theatrical scripts in which drama and fantasy have a pivotal presence. Drawing upon a longitudinal case study of an academic institution, Kersten examines some aspects of the 'performance' in which leadership and follower behaviour unconsciously are complicit in enacting neurosis. It is through the optic of the theatre that Kersten finds both the problem and some solutions to neurotic and some other dysfunctional tendencies.

The paper by Philip Hancock invites us into the world of the noted Scottish architect, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Within the inspirational works of Mackintosh, Hancock identifies 'dimensions' of the unconscious instinctual desire for the sensual and the tensions created when this yearning is pitched against the harsh reality of reason and the pragmatic. Also drawing for inspiration and insight from the work of the Frankfurt School, therefore, Hancock argues that it is this dialectical tension which holds the potential for a radical, and potentially emancipatory way of thinking about and doing organization. A potential embedded in what Hancock argues is the capacity of Mackintosh's work's to aesthetically mediate

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these tensions not in an identitarian fashion, but rather through their configuration into a constellation of mutual recognition and complementarity.

The final paper in this special issue is from Sarah Gilmore and Samantha Warren and like Hancock reflects upon the matter of design. In the case of Gilmore and Warren, they suggest that organizations have attempted experiments with changes to the physical aspects of the workplace on the assumption that this may improve the context for employees to be more creative, even artistic, in their work environment that will enhance competitive performance of the company. Gilmore and Warren offer a number of criticisms of this approach and nicely capture the manner in which these experiments have overlooked the unconscious psychodynamics related to groups that may serve to inhibit workplace creativity. It is in this explication of critique that Gilmore and Warren provide a powerful set of touchstones for those who wish to enact organisation design and practices that enhance the creativity of employees.

The set of papers that comprise this special issue we hope serve to engender a broader conversation such that the realm of the unconscious and that of art and aesthetics become valuable sources of inspiration and liberation for the fields of management and organization studies.

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