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Doubting Thomas:
Sensemaking, sensegiving and storytelling in the excellence project[1]

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Introduction

Until the 1980s the publishing industry in the USA was dominated by books which documented the lives of its celebrities; by investigative journalism that probed the misdeeds of its political class; and by guidebooks which offered advice on sex and nutrition (Huczynski, 1993; Collins, 2007). Since the 1980s, however, managerial texts have attracted a significant audience and have, consequently, figured very prominently on the 'best sellers lists' which are produced by newspapers in the US, UK and elsewhere. Commenting on the growth of this segment of the publishing industry, Pagel and Westerfelhaus (2005) note that by 1991 there were 1,421 'popular management' titles available in the US alone. Furthermore the authors observe that by 2001 the US consumer could select from some 5,023 popular management titles and did so with zest, generating $938.3 million in sales.

Like the devil himself, popular management, goes by many names. Huczynski's (1993) preferred term, for example, directs our attention towards the authors of such works. Thus Huczynski speaks of 'guru theory'. Burrell (1997), meanwhile, directs our attention to the peculiarities of this marketplace as he makes reference to 'Heathrow Organization Theory'.

Clearly there is more to popular management than volume sales alone. Indeed when academics suggest that a text belongs to the popular management segment of the book publishing market they tend to betray an aesthetic judgement while highlighting an empirical fact (see Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). When the subject is management knowledge, therefore, references to popularity tend to imply populism and hence a low-brow vulgarity.

Pagel and Westerfelhaus (1999; 2005) have attempted to describe the essence of popular management. Exploring user perceptions they have attempted to sidestep the wider politico-aesthetic dimensions of the debate highlighted by Rhodes and Westwood (2008). Working within a more positive tradition, therefore, Pagel and Westerfelhaus observe that popular management constitutes a distinctive literary genre which exists in opposition to scholarly texts on management. Such scholarly texts are, they tell us, lengthy; indirect in their manner of expression; abstract in their conceptualisation; and inclined to the use of complex language. In contrast the authors of popular management are said to produce texts that are short; concise; rooted in a concern for concrete examples; and conveyed by means of a simple vocabulary.

Rüling (2005) however suggests that Pagel and Westerfelhaus wrongly assert the existence of a categorical distinction between genres which are, in truth, different by degrees. Building upon the work of Mazza and Alvarez (2000), Rüling notes that all texts – whether these be academic, scientific or popular in character – have a rhetorical dimension. Nonetheless he concedes that 'ideological (as opposed to technical) statements' (180) are more prevalent in those forms of expression labelled as popular management. Thus Rüling (2005) observes that popular management is, in comparison to more scholarly work, inclined to base its arguments on persuasive examples (see Lischinsky, 2008) and in so doing tends to call upon 'heroic success stories' (Rüling, 2005: 180) to substantiate its assertions.

Höpfl's (1995) analysis of popular management rhetoric anticipates and extends the analysis of Mazza and Alvarez (2000). Setting aside the structural aspects analysed by Pagel and Westerfelhaus (1999; 2005), Höpfl suggests that popular management should be defined in relation to its core orientations and concerns. Thus she argues that popular management is a

distinctive literary genre which directs itself to the appropriation of emotional and spiritual experience. Focusing attention on the ways in which such texts have impacted upon day-to-day routines and interactions she avers that popular management is a masculine projection; a corporate rhetoric focused upon the elaboration of ornate narratives of organizational performance which, since the 1980s, has been directed towards rank-and-file employees.

This paper offers a distinctive reanalysis of popular management. It seeks to explore the implications which corporate attempts to appropriate emotional and spiritual experience have for identity, performance and social reciprocity. Acknowledging the extent to which popular management deploys and depends upon tales of heroic success we will use tales of organizational life to analyse what, we suggest, should be considered to be the very archetype of popular management. Reviewing the key writings of Tom Peters (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Peters and Austin, 1985; Peters, 1987; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1997; 2003), therefore, we will examine the large-scale and long-term sensegiving initiative (Gioia and Chittepeddi, 1991) that has come to be known as 'the excellence project'. Offering a critical analysis of the stories that have given this endeavour shape and substance we hope to:

a) deepen our appreciation of popular management

b) resituate the sensegiving that is central to popular management in the light of more localised processes of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

This storytelling approach, we believe, is *appropriate, revealing* and *productive.* Our approach is *appropriate* to the task we have set ourselves insofar as it acknowledges the debt which popular management owes to storytelling (Maidique, 1983; McConkie and Bass, 1986; Pagel and Westerfelhaus, 1999; 2005; Hyatt, 1999; Watson, 2001). Our analytical approach is also *revealing*

insofar as it uses the stories deployed within the excellence project, itself, to probe the ways in which popular management texts have attempted to shape our sense of who we are and our sense of what it is to manage (see Jackson, 1996). Finally our analysis is *productive* inasmuch as it offers – uniquely – a longitudinal analysis of guru storytelling which in probing the sensegiving capabilities of popular management narratives encourages us to take the excellence project seriously (see Abrahamson, 1996). Yet while our analysis insists that we must take popular management seriously, it has been designed to counter those narratives that have sought, either, to vindicate (Ackman, 2002) or, indeed, to rehabilitate the search for excellence in business (see Colville et al, 1999).

Accordingly, our analysis of the excellence project is structured as follows: In our first section we offer an analytical exploration of that devil with many names - popular management. Building upon the work of Huczynski (1993) we will explore the rhetorical essence of the excellence project and through this exploration we will attempt to highlight the enduring significance of this sensegiving endeavour.

Acknowledging the extent to which popular management builds and depends upon the arts of the storyteller our second main section will pause to offer an account of organizational storytelling. Those who have contributed to the academic literature on organizational storytelling (see for example, Boje, 1991; 2001; Boyce, 1995; Gabriel, 1998; 2000; Buchanan, 2003; Hopkinson, 2003; Collins and Rainwater, 2005; Tsoukas, 2005) have enriched our appreciation of the dynamics of managing and organizing. Yet research in this arena, often, proceeds in the absence of any detailed agreement as to the essential nature and character of stories. Recognising a) that we cannot hope to offer a comprehensive review of this complex and contested arena and b) that our

exploration of the excellence project depends upon a proven ability to separate poetical tales from larger and more general narratives of business excellence we will focus upon a range of contributions that have sought to debate the essential character of the story. Thus we will analyse the contributions of Boje (1991; 2001), Gabriel (1998; 2000; 2004) and Greatbatch and Clark (2005).

In our third section we will attempt to operationalise the model of the poetic tale outlined in section two as we conduct our longitudinal review of the tales that frame the excellence project. This reanalysis builds upon the corpus of Tom Peters' stories that was collated and analysed by Collins (2007; 2008). The current review, however, interprets these tales of business excellence in the light of the classificatory scheme developed by Martin et al (1983).

The work of Martin et al provides a useful foil for the excellence project. It was, for example, published within months of *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and like this, earlier text, builds upon the authors' reflections on the nature and processes of organizational storytelling. Furthermore Martin et al share Peters' conviction that the workplace is an environment shaped by and, in some sense, designed according to the arts of the storyteller. Indeed they observe that similar tales of organization circulate in quite different locales. Commenting on the recurrence of these familiar stories, however, they depart somewhat from Peter's preferred conceptualisation of management. Highlighting the ways in which our experience of work and organization is conditioned by asymmetrical power relations, Martin et al argue that these common tales of organization reflect and project the core anxieties that shape our working lives.

Reviewing Peters' tales of excellence in the light of the schema developed by Martin and her colleagues, we will argue, offers revealing insights into the ways and means of popular. Indeed we will argue that our review of the excellence project demonstrates the ways in which popular management has sought to ensure our subscription to a form of organizational life that has a disruptive, but non-reciprocal, character.

Excavating the excellence project

The excellence project can trace its roots back to *In Search of Excellence* which was published by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in 1982. Penned against a backdrop of economic stagflation this text was written, in part, as a response to those who had, variously, predicted (Kahn, 1970; Kahn and Pepper, 1978) or fretted over Japan's imminent commercial and technological dominance (Hayes and Abernathy, 1980). Countering such pessimistic forms of analysis, Peters and Waterman argued that it was overly simplistic to assume that Japanese management was 'good' and its American counterpart 'bad'. Indeed Peters and Waterman protested that a high quality and distinctive form of, home-grown, American management had survived in the face of the 'hard', scientific-technical, narrative of management which had become dominant in the US from the 1950s.

Building upon the McKinsey 7-S framework – a device designed to reveal the socio-technical totality of the organized world – Peters and Waterman urged all those working in the US to adopt the practises which they claimed were evident across a range of high-performing organizations. And in an attempt to bring some structure to this activity the authors outlined the 8 attributes that their inquiries suggested were characteristic of organizational excellence.

Not all, however, were convinced by these claims. Carroll (1983), an executive with *Hoover* and a sceptical contributor to the debate surrounding America' competitive decline (see Carroll, 1980), argued that *In Search of Excellence* failed to take account of broader structural conditions and constraints. Almost a decade later, Guest (1992) produced a similar critique. Focusing upon the research undertaken by Peters and Waterman, Guest argued that the search for business excellence was bound to end in failure because the mapping technologies shaping this quest – the conceptualisation of business performance and the methodological practices underpinning the construction of the research sample - suffered from fundamental flaws.

On the strength of these commentaries much of the academic community quickly decided that Peters and his account of excellence could be ignored or should, at least, be forgotten (see Collins, 2007; Gabriel, 2008). Indeed those academics who did continue to speak of Peters and his excellence project tended to do so in a derisory manner. So in 1984 when *Business Week* (5/11/1984) announced the rapid decline of those companies that had been named as excellent the sense of academic *schadenfreude* was palpable. Yet in 2002 when Ackman (2002) produced a financial analysis that demonstrated, not just the turnaround of these 'failing' companies, but their enduring market performance over a twenty-year time frame, few academics noticed and fewer still commented. In this respect Watson's (2001) account of the excellence project is noteworthy.

Unlike Ackman's text, Watson's contribution to the excellence debate is not rooted in an analysis of financial performance. Nonetheless Watson suggests that the broad claims voiced by Peters are significant and should be taken seriously by scholars of organization and management.

Building upon a social constructionist framework Watson argues that Peters' texts are significant insofar as they have provided managers and policy-makers more generally with an enduring rhetoric for organizational change. This rhetoric, he adds, has had a profound effect upon our understanding of work, performance and identity. Yet Watson warns us that to make sense of the excellence project we must be prepared to look beyond the obvious flaws of this endeavour and, what is more, we must be prepared to take seriously the underlying ideas and orientations which give it form and substance.

Discussing the essence of 'guru theory', Huczynski (1993) offers an analytical framework, designed to explore the underlying rhetorical claims of popular management. For Huczynski the central feature of guru theory is its contention that the only objective of modern business is to compete for the patronage of the sovereign consumer. Underpinning this assertion there are, he argues, five core beliefs:

1. The organizational innovation that improves product and service offerings does not lend itself to formal planning mechanisms. Rather innovation must be allowed to emerge through experimentation and rapid prototyping.
2. Successful managers display a bias for action since, in the organized, world it is often necessary to act yourself into a feeling.
3. The social organization of the workplace cannot be ruled by command and control mechanisms but must be co-ordinated through the manipulation of cultural norms and values.
4. Customers must be recognised as the primary source of innovation.
5. Managers must cultivate a strong customer orientation and should ensure that this shapes their attitudes and behaviour.

Pursuing the impact of these claims Watson, suggests that Tom Peters' initial (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and indeed his subsequent renderings of business excellence (see Peters and Austin, 1985; Peters, 1987; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1997; 2003) have had a significant and an enduring impact upon the rhetoric and practice of management. Indeed Watson argues that the excellence project has had an impact on the standing of management in the wider society because it has successfully positioned managers as heroic actors, uniquely endowed with the capacity to generate a sense of moral order *(nomos)* from the general chaos of social organization. In short Watson argues that the excellence project has been – despite its flaws and despite its detractors – remarkably successful as a sensegiving endeavour.

Huczynski's (1993) review, however, suggests that we should take this further. His analysis of guru rhetoric suggests that the excellence project occupies a very privileged position in the canon of popular management. Indeed Huczynski's excavation of guru theory suggests that Peters' manifesto for organizational change constitutes the prototype for, and the archetype of, that literary genre which has been named as popular management. Thus Huczynski's analysis suggests that the excellence project – mocked or forgotten by serious, scholarly, commentators – is the dominant current *and* the well-spring for a billion dollar industry.

But we must not get carried away. It is important that we do not confuse patterns with designs! And with this in mind we should note that - true to its own constitution – the excellence project did not unfold according to a grand plan or great conspiracy (see Crainer, 1997). Indeed we should recall that *In Search of Excellence* was an unlikely (Colville et al, 1999) and an unexpected market success (Collins, 2007).

In addition we would do well to point out that while Watson and Huczynski recognise the significance of popular management as a long-term sensegiving endeavour they are neither apologists for the excellence project nor hagiographers of management's gurus. Unlike others, therefore (see Colville Waterman and Weick, 1999; Linstead, 2002 for an interesting exchange), Watson is keen to remind us that the excellence project remains a flawed and partisan endeavour. Indeed the excellence project is, for Watson, a shrewdly normative and calculating initiative; an initiative, we would do well to remember, that was designed to produce a new income stream for McKinsey (Crainer, 1997), yet generated quite by accident, a new literary genre.

Finally it would be a mistake to foster a static account of business excellence. Indeed we must concede that while the excellence project has retained its action orientation; has remained faithful to its, cultural, root metaphor; and has bequeathed its philosophy of strategic exchange to subsequent generations of popular management it has continued to evolve within the parameters outlined by Huczynski (1993). In recent years, for example, Tom Peters - the Adam of popular management - has attempted to widen the base of the excellence project to include European organizations (Peters, 1992). Similarly – and from the mid-1990s – Peters (1994; 1997) has enlarged his account of the essence of business excellence to take account of a new narrative – the language of product design. Furthermore the excellence project has been 'feminised' (see Höpfl, 1995) to some degree through the production of a narrative designed to reveal the market power and business potential of women Peters n/d; 2003).

In a later section we will look in more detail at the ornate narratives of organizational performance that shape this dynamic sensegiving endeavour. Yet before we do this we must pause to consider

the essential characteristic of (organizational) stories and the competing perspectives that cloud this arena.

Stories in Organizational Analysis

Introducing their *Handbook of Organizational Discourse,* Grant and his colleagues (Grant et al, 2004) offer an exploration of the larger narrative themes that underpin the excellence project. They observe that:

> 'A growing disillusionment with many of the mainstream theories and methodologies that underpin organizational studies has encouraged scholars to seek alternative ways in which to describe, analyze and theorize the increasingly complex processes and practices that constitute "organization"' (1).

However they concede that 'some have observed that this growth appears to have been achieved through the widespread use of broad, non-specific definitions [of discourse] and a bewildering array of methods, approaches and perspectives' (1). In an attempt to manage this issue Grant et al suggest that the field might be sub-divided to acknowledge the overlapping, yet nonetheless distinctive, contributions of those who have analysed organization discursively. Thus the authors observe that students of organizational discourse might pursue their interests by exploring:

- Conversation and dialogue
- Narratives and stories
- Rhetorics
- Tropes

Gabriel (1995; 1998; 2000; 2004), Boje (1991; 2001) and Greatbatch and Clark (2005) have each pursued an element of the discursive terrain outlined by Grant et al. In different ways, as we shall see, each has offered an account of management and organization that is rooted in the analysis of storytelling.

Reflecting upon the roots of the current interest in narratives and stories, Gabriel (1998; 2000) reminds us that the, contemporary, interest in storytelling derives from earlier attempts to catalogue and harvest folklore and yet departs from this tradition insofar as it insists that organizational stories have meaning and significance only when they are acknowledged to be vital constituents of social organization. In this respect the interpretative studies of organizational storytelling that are preferred by Gabriel and by Boje (1991; 2001) represent an attempt to redeem stories from those traditions of modernist scholarship which protest that such narratives are secondary to social organization and subordinate to facts.

Yet, as any review of the academic literature on organizational storytelling soon reveals, a shared interest in interpretative methods of inquiry seems to be about all that unites the key commentaries in this arena. Indeed the study of stories in, at and of work has grown in the absence of any meaningful consensus as to the essential nature of these tales.

The Nature of Stories

Greatbatch and Clark (2005) offer, perhaps, the loosest definition of organizational stories. Analysing management seminars they explore the tools and processes of audience enrolment, employed by those key commentators which Huczynski (1993) labels as gurus. To facilitate this analysis Greatbatch and Clark produce a definition of stories in two parts.

Alluding to a disagreement that persists between Boje and Gabriel, they observe that a story is:

a) anything that announces itself to be a story although they acknowledge that such tales may take a variety of forms. Indeed Greatbatch and Clark tell us that stories 'may be "terse" depictions of events, situations and happenings in that they comprise single, fragmented sentences or they may be elaborate and extended narratives that unfold over many sentences and several minutes' (110).
b) any 'segment of talk that is recognizable and hearable as a story' (110).

This categorization, however, does little to refine the concept of the story[i]. Moreover it quickly runs up against the limitations that frame the methodology adopted by these authors.

Greatbatch's and Clark's (2005) account of audience enrolment is based on the analysis of pre-recorded seminars. But for reasons that are never made clear the authors are obliged to work from recorded *extracts* of these seminars. Given this limitation we might speculate on the authors' ability to place their gurus' claims, tales and broader enrolment strategies within a sensible context. Furthermore we would do well to note that these seminar recordings – whether abridged or otherwise – are produced with a specific purpose in mind: They are designed as aids to staff training. Consequently the camera tends to focus its attention upon the guru and the stage that s/he occupies. The audience, therefore, appears on screen irregularly and only fleetingly. Indeed for the most part the audience exists off-stage and reminds us of its presence only periodically, through the sound of its laughter and, less frequently, the noise of its applause. Yet despite this multi-layered absence, Greatbatch and Clark claim to know what the audience 'hears' and how they 'hear' it! Indeed, despite their absence from the seminar and despite the fact that they have

witnessed, only, fleeting moments of an historic event from a peculiar vantage point the authors, blithely, assume that they share with the audience a clear and certain appreciation of what could be heard as a story in that place and at that time!

Of course Greatbatch and Clark might counter that it would be unfair to consider this half of their definition in the absence of its twin. Indeed they might well argue that stories are easy to recognise because they generally announce themselves. And to some extent this is true. Many stories do, indeed, employ discursive forms that are, in any sense of the term, conventional. For example forms of phraseology such as: *Once upon a time…; Are you sitting comfortably?...;* and *Gentlemen, that reminds me…*do, generally, signal that someone intends to regale us with a tale. But narratives need more than a fanfare to qualify as stories. For example it seems clear that most people who heard the following refrain:

Let me tell you a story…An Englishman; a Scotsman; and an Irishman enter a bar…

would prepare themselves for a form of narrative that we would – despite its potential for offence – normally name as 'a joke'. Equally it seems plain that any individual who ventured the following:

Here's a story for you: y = mx + c

would be met with a blank expression.

Boje (1991; 2001) offers an altogether more restrictive view of stories and storytelling. Unlike Greatbatch and Clark, he insists that stories may be defined *a priori*. Furthermore he is adamant that we must make an effort to distinguish organizational tales from other narrative forms.

In his early work on this subject Boje (1991) stressed the organic and polyphonic character of 'stories' and contrasted these with the monological narratives of business that are produced by

publications such as the *Harvard Business Review* (Collins and Rainwater, 2005). Indeed Boje observed that storytelling in the firm, which he studied was, both, social and in some sense competitive. Consequently the organizational storytellers that he encountered were obliged to endure repeated interruptions from an audience that, plainly, failed to recognise the normal manners of the theatre.

Perhaps mindful of these interruptions Boje (1991) suggests that the shortest tale consists of just four words: *you know the story.* Gabriel (2000), however, disputes this. Both Boje and Greatbatch and Clark (2005) are, he would argue, mistaken in their suggestion that stories can be found in such terse fragments of text. These four words, Gabriel protests, do not and cannot tell a story. They may well, he concedes, be evocative of a shared tale. But, for Gabriel, this terse fragment of text cannot be regarded as a story because poetic tales need characters and depend upon the presence of a plot.

In a later text Boje (2001) takes a more radical turn. He suggests that stories exist prior to plots, and so, have an *antenarrative* character. Stories are, he tells us, concerned with *process.* They are 'self-deconstructing, flowing, emerging and networking' (1) whereas narratives are said to be plotted, directed and staged to produce a fixed, linear and, above all, a monological rendering of *events.*

In part, this *antenarrative* conceptualisation of stories needs to be understood as a reaction to Czarniawska's (1997) account of the essence of organizational tales, which suggests that 'a story consists of a plot comprising casually related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem' (78). And in fairness to Boje we should concede that Czarniawska's words do seem to offer a

description of a particular form of story that masquerades as a more general definition[ii]. Yet it is not at all clear that Boje's preferred definition of stories actually supports his *antenarrative* claim.

Elaborating on the *antenarrative* character of his tales, Boje tells us that he sides with Gallie (1968):

> 'A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls forth thought, action, or both. This response to the new situation leads the story towards its conclusion' (Boje, 2001: 22).

Yet in this quotation we seem to have people who change and develop as they encounter events. In short we have characters!

We have, furthermore, a changing situation that becomes a predicament calling forth thought, action or both as we work towards a conclusion. In other words we have a plot. Indeed we appear to have a very conventional plot; a plot with a rhythm; a plot with a heartbeat; a plot that Booker (2004) observes is, literally, typical of storytelling the world over!

So what is an *antenarrative* if it rejects plot and narrative coherence and yet defines itself in these very terms? On one hand it's just a story. Yet on the other hand – the left hand presumably[iii] – it is a bad story; the sort of story that disappoints; the sort of story that breaches the covenant between

storyteller and audience that is, Gabriel (2000; see also Collins, 2007) insists, brokered each time a tale is introduced.

Of course, we should concede that Boje's interest in the formative stages of organizational sensemaking is both valid and revealing of local processes of social organization. The problem with Boje's *antenarrative* formulation, however, is that it privileges this stage of the sensemaking processes. Indeed it seems that Boje would preserve and crystallize these early stages of the sensemaking process. Yet in so doing he fails acknowledge that 'the folk' within the folklore of organization tell (and listen to) stories for a reason: The reason being, of course, that stories entertain, while providing us with the means to manufacture –albeit locally and temporarily - coherence from the ambiguity of our everyday lives!

Additionally we should point out that Boje's own work (see Boje, 1998; Boje, Alvarez and Schooling, 2001) actually demonstrates the extent to which the stabilizing, monological narratives that he regards as murderous of sense remain subject to contest and revision. Thus Boje – quite inadvertently and in opposition to his own claims – reveals the presence of plots within his *antenarrative* tales *and what is more* demonstrates the essential fragility of these devices.

Viewed collectively our analysis of the work of Greatbatch and Clark (2005) and of the works of Boje (1991; 2001) demonstrates:

a) The tensions that exist within the academic literature on organizational storytelling.

b) The extent to which accounts of storytelling at work reflect and project particular definitions of tales.

c) The need for an explicit definition of organizational storytelling that can capture the essence of this narrative form and, in so doing, support critical academic inquiry in this arena.

Gabriel (2000, 2004) provides an explicit definition of organizational storytelling that, in being sensitive to the nature of this narrative form and to the context of its performance can support critical academic inquiry. Harking back to classical accounts (see Aristotle, 1965) he provides an account of the essence of organizational stories that is similar to that employed by Martin et al (1983) and compatible with the work of key contemporaries (see, Czarniawska, 1997; 1999; Søderberg, 2003)[iv].

Reflecting Aristotle's insights, Gabriel insists that stories are a special form of narrative. Indeed he warns us that these need to be distinguished from other, similar, forms such as 'histories' that seek an engagement with 'fact' and with the literal truth of events. Stories, in contrast, seek to entertain and in so doing may exercise some degree of 'poetic licence' in the pursuit of some larger or more general truth (see Collins, 2007 for examples). Thus Gabriel defines stories as distinctive forms of narrative which:

- place characters in a predicament
- unfold in a manner that reflects the structure of the plot and the essential traits of the characters involved
- depend upon symbolic resources
- proceed to a satisfactory conclusion

- seek a relationship with a deeper and more enduring truth than is achieved through mere factual verification.

In the next section we will analyse the excellence project in the light of Gabriel's account of the essence of poetic tales. Building upon the work of Martin et al (1983) we will suggest that an exploration of the key – and persistent - organizational dualities, which shape our experiences of working, has much to teach us about the meaning and effect of the excellence project. Furthermore we will argue that this reanalysis of Peters' texts offers an interesting insight into the sensemaking processes that shaped this project in its early stages.

Putting Stories to Work

Collins (2007; 2008) has offered a longitudinal analysis of the excellence project (see Figure One) that builds upon the methodological approach developed by Gabriel (2000; 2004). Reviewing the key texts produced by Tom Peters between 1982 and 2003 Collins demonstrates this pundit's commitment to, and his dependence upon, the arts of the storyteller. Yet Collins also documents an absolute decline in Peters' storytelling, while highlighting the variety of story forms employed by this guru. This analysis modifies Rüling's (2005) account of the nature of popular management in crucial respects. Thus figure one demonstrates that while the excellence project does, indeed, lean upon 'heroic success stories' (Rüling, 2005: 180) it also makes use of 'comic' and 'tragic' tales in its sensegiving endeavours.

Text	Epic Tales (%)	Comic Tales (%)	Tragic Tales (%)	Romantic Tales (%)	Tragi-comic Tales (%)	Ambiguous Tales (%)
In Search of Excellence	97 (71)	21 (15)	9 (6.5)	0 (0)	8 (6)	2 (2)
A Passion for Excellence	132 (80)	9 (5)	12 (7)	0 (0)	5 (3)	7 (4)
Thriving on	111 (94)	0 (0)	6 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)

Chaos						
Liberation Management	92 (82)	1 (1)	17 (15)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)
The Tom Peters Seminar	33 (81)	2 (5)	3 (7)	0 (0)	2 (5)	1 (2)
The Pursuit of Wow	53 (93)	0 (0)	3 (5)	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)
The Circle of Innovation	29 (76)	3 (8)	2 (5)	0 (0)	1 (3)	3 (8)
Re-imagine	30 (68)	2 (5)	7 (16)	0 (0)	5 (11)	0 (0)

Figure One: An analysis of the stories recounted by Peters in his key works sorted by narrative type. Source Collins (2007)

The Uniqueness Paradox

In common with Collins, Martin et al (1983) offer a distinctive analysis of the world of work that is rooted within an appreciation of the dynamics of organizational storytelling. Martin et al observe that most organizational cultures make a claim to uniqueness and would seek to substantiate this title by reference to cultural manifestations such as shared stories. Yet they point out that these organizational stories 'exhibit a remarkable similarity in content and structure' (439). Consequently there exists a 'uniqueness paradox' (439) in the sense that '*a culture's claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique'* (439, original emphasis).

Examining organizational stories as cultural manifestations, Martin et al argue that 'seven stories that make tacit claims to uniqueness…occur, in virtually identical form, in a wide variety of organizations' (439). To aid analysis the authors identify these tales as a series of questions which, in highlighting core anxieties in relation to performance, narrate the organization 'from below':

1. Do senior organizational members abide by the rules that they have set down?
2. Is the big boss human?
3. Is the organization meritocratic?
4. Will I get fired?
5. Will the organization assist me to relocate?

6. How does the organization deal with mistakes?
7. How does the organization deal with obstacles?

These seven story forms, while not exhaustive of narrative possibilities, are, the authors argue, widespread and enduring because they 'express tensions that arise from a conflict between organizational exigencies and the values of employees, which are, in turn reflective of the values of the larger society' (447). In particular Martin et al suggest that these narratives are related to concerns which organizational members have with respect to equality, security and control. Thus the authors argue that story-types 1, 2 and 3 (see above) deal with concerns related to equality and inequality at work; story-types 4, 5 and 6 relate to tensions formed around a security-insecurity duality; and story-type 7 reflects concerns with respect to control and autonomy in this context. Figure two reflects our attempt to place the tales of business excellence that were collated by Collins (2007; 2008) within the conceptual schema outlined by Martin et al (1983)[v].

	In Search of Excellence Story Count (%)	A Passion for Excellence	Thriving on Chaos	Liberation Management	Tom Peters Seminar	The Pursuit of Wow	The Circle of Innovation	Re-imagine
Type 1	71 (52)	38 (23)	39 (33)	40 (35)	14 (34)	23 (40)	22 (58)	4 (9)
Type 2	29 (21)	103 (62)	66 (56)	43 (38)	15 (37)	23 (40)	8 (21)	24 (55)
Type 3	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 4	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 5	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 6	3 (2)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Type 7	10 (7)	24 (14)	11 (9)	26 (23)	12 (29)	11 (19)	5 (13)	15 (34)
N/C	23 (17)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (8%)	0 (0)

Figure 2
An analysis of Tom Peters' storywork in the context of Martin et al's (1983) account of recurrent organizational stories

Despite the potential for overlap it proved relatively easy to assign Peters' tales to one of the seven scriptal types outlined. It was, for example, generally easy to distinguish those stories that dealt with the immediate fear of dismissal (type 4) from those tales that chose to highlight the essential decency and humanity of a senior figure (type 2). Likewise it proved easy to separate those tales that dealt with mistakes (type 6) from those that dealt more generally with obstacles (type 7) or with the transgression of organizational rules and norms (type 4)[vi]. However a minority of Peters' tales (see Figure Two) - 27 in total - could not be accommodated within this framework. This outcome was anticipated. Martin and her colleagues, after all, do not pretend that their seven story types are, in any sense, comprehensive or exhaustive of narrative possibilities. What was unexpected was that the majority of these tales - 85% of the unclassified stories - emanated from just one publication, *In Search of Excellence.*

This finding has both, positive and negative connotations. On the positive side it suggests that *In Search of Excellence* is more varied and more diverse in its storytelling than subsequent contributions to the excellence project. Yet, on the negative side, our analysis suggests that *In Search of Excellence,* while more diverse in its storywork, may be weaker as a managerial sensegiving tool (Gioia and Chittepeddi, 1991; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996) because (more so than subsequent texts) it raises, but fails fully to address or resolve, the persistent organizational dualities identified by Martin et al. Thus our 'unclassified tales' indicate but fail to precipitate dualities in relation to organizational control:

> 'Adult subjects were given some complex tasks to solve and a proofreading chore. In the background was a loud, randomly occurring distracting note; to be specific it was "a combination of two people speaking Spanish, one speaking Armenian, a mimeograph machine running, a desk calculator, and a typewriter, and street noise – producing a composite nondistinguishable roar". The subjects were split into two groups. Individuals in one set were just told to work at the task. Individuals in the other were provided with a button to turn off the noise, "a modern analog of control – the off switch". The group with the off switch solved five times the number of puzzles as their cohorts and made but a tiny fraction of the number of proofreading errors. Now for the kicker: "…none of the subjects in the off switch group ever used the switch. The mere knowledge that one can exert control made the difference"' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: xxiii).

The unclassified tales also speak of the problems that arise due to the relationship between action and perception:

> '…what's called "foot-in-the-door" research demonstrates the importance of incrementally acting our way into major commitment. For instance, in one experiment, in Palo Alto,

> California, most subjects who initially agreed to put a *tiny* sign in their front window supporting a cause (traffic safety) subsequently agreed to display a billboard in their front yard, which required letting outsiders dig sizable holes in the lawn. On the other hand, those not asked to take the first small step turned down the larger one in ninety-five cases out of a hundred' (Peters and waterman, 1982: 74 emphasis in original).

Additionally tales that testify to the organizing potential of stories, themselves, are relayed:

> 'As we worked on research of our excellent companies, we were struck by the dominant use of story, slogan and legend as people tried to explain the characteristics of their own great institutions. All the companies we interviewed, from Boeing to McDonald's were quite simply rich tapestries of anecdote, myth and fairy tale. And we do mean fairy tale. The vast majority of people who tell stories about TJ Watson of IBM have never met the man or had direct experience of the original more mundane reality. Two HP engineers regaled us with an hour's worth of "Bill and Dave" (Hewlett and Packard) stories. We were subsequently astonished to find that neither had seen, let alone talked to, the founders' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 75).

The presence and position of these unclassified tales within *In Search of Excellence* is notable. It suggests that, at the outset of the excellence project, Peters and Waterman struggled with stories and had – in their terms – to think themselves into the form of action, which would allow stories to be used, not as examples of organizational life, but as exemplars for a new form of organized existence. Thus our review of Peters' storywork suggests that the managerial credo, which we now associate with popular management, remained a 'work in progress' even as *In Search of Excellence* went to press (see Hyatt, 1999)[vii].

The classified tales are similarly significant, both, for what they say and for what they fail to speak of. Yet we must concede that in seeking to classify Peters' tales within the framework outlined by Martin et al we were obliged to make minor adjustments to their schema.

In Martin et al's (1983) analysis, story type 1 reflects the question: *Do senior organizational members abide by the rules that they have set down?* and is said to reflect a duality focused upon equality-inequality. In Peters' storytelling, however, questions in relation to leaders and rules surface within a different dynamic; a dynamic which is focused more upon 'mould-breaking' in the context of hyper-competitive market conditions. In this regard Tom Peter's 'mould-breaking' tales reflect a duality that turns upon organizational control. Consequently these tales of managerial conduct are more closely related to the seventh story type outlined by Martin et al. Figure three incorporates this adjustment and, in so doing, seeks to document the orientations that shape the excellence project.

	Duality	In Search of Excellence Story Count (%)	A Passion for Excellence	Thriving on Chaos	Liberation Management	Tom Peters Seminar	The Pursuit of Wow	The Circle of Innovation	Re-imagine
Type 2	Equality-Inequality	29 (21)	103 (62)	66 (56)	43 (38)	15 (37)	23 (40)	8 (21)	24 (55)
Type 3	Equality - Inequality	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 4	Security-Insecurity	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 5	Security - Insecurity	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Type 6	Security-Insecurity	3 (2)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Type 7	Control	10 (7)	24 (14)	11 (9)	26 (23)	12 (29)	11 (19)	5 (13)	15 (34)
Type 1	Control	71 (52)	38 (23)	39 (33)	40 (35)	14 (34)	23 (40)	22 (58)	4 (9)
N/C	---	23 (17)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (8%)	0 (0)

Figure 3
An analysis of the organizational dualities expressed by Tom Peters' stories

Figure three demonstrates that the majority of Peters' storywork is focused upon 'control'. Yet, perhaps more importantly, our review of Peters' storywork demonstrates that the excellence project seeks to resolve the organizational tensions associated with managerial control by portraying managers as transformational leaders who will deliver (competitive) salvation through radical change. A couple of examples should suffice as illustrations:

> 'During our first round of interviews we could "feel it". The language used in talking about people was different. The expectation of regular contributions was different. The love of the product and customers was palpable. And we felt different ourselves, walking around an HP or 3M facility watching groups at work and play, from the way we had in most of the more bureaucratic institutions we have had experience with. It was watching busy bands of engineers, salesmen and manufacturers casually hammering out problems in a conference room in St. Paul in February; even a customer was there. It was seeing an HP division manager's office ($100 million unit), tiny, wall-less on the factory floor, shared with a

> secretary. It was seeing Dana's new chairman, Gerald Mitchell, bearhugging a colleague in the hall after lunch in the Toledo headquarters. It was very far removed from silent board rooms marked by dim lights, somber presentations, rows of staffers lined up along the walls with calculators glowing, and the endless click of the slide projector as analysis after analysis lit up the screen' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 16).

Similar praise is offered for Rene McPherson who, like Gerald Mitchell, is suggested as a role-model:

> 'When Dana's Rene McPherson, who made his mark with sparkling accomplishment in that most difficult of areas, productivity in a slow-moving, unionized industry, became dean of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, one of our colleagues, who had just become associate dean, anxiously took us aside. "We've got to talk", he insisted. "I've just had my first long meeting with Rene. He talked to me about his Dana experience. Do you know that not one thing he did there is even mentioned in the MBA curriculum?"' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 36).

The equality-inequality duality is, similarly, raised and resolved. The response to the question: *Is the big boss human?* is, for the excellent organizations at least, plainly and straightforwardly, *yes*. The response to the question: *Is the organization meritocratic?* is, perhaps, more muted insofar as few stories are devoted to this issue. Yet we might counter that this minimization actually signals Peters' taken-for-granted assumption that, in a business context shaped by hyper-competition and by the whim of sovereign consumers, modern organizations simply cannot afford to be anything other than meritocratic.

Peters' treatment of the security-insecurity duality is particularly striking. In a corpus of more than 700 stories there are just eight tales that deal with this topic and, of these, six deal with the threat of dismissal – but in a distinctive way. In Martin et al's (1983) schema, dismissal awaits those who make mistakes in the context of their everyday work routines. Yet, in the context of the excellence project, summary termination appears to await those who confine themselves to such routine forms of working:

> '…one of us remembers Cat [the manufacturer of construction equipment] from our days ordering construction equipment for the Navy in Vietnam. We would go to almost any ends, stretching the procurement regulations to the limit, to specify the always more expensive Cat equipment. We had to, for we knew our field commanders would string us up if we didn't find a way to get them Cat. When you're airlifting bulldozers into unfriendly territory for the purpose of building short airstrips behind enemy lines, you want machinery that works – all the time' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 171-2).

Questions related to the management of relocation (story type 5) and the, consequent, need to ease such transitions are, entirely, absent from Peters' storyworld. This finding is particularly revealing for it suggests that issues associated with economic dislocation and organizational insecurity – concerns which have become more pressing in recent decades (see Peterson, 1995; Cappelli, 1995; Cappelli et al, 1997; Sennett, 1998; Gray, 1999) - are simply irrelevant within the excellence project. Indeed the outright disregard of this issue is highly significant insofar as it suggest that the excellence project, when viewed from below, is one-sided and non-reciprocal in nature. Viewed within the overall context of our analysis of Tom Peters' storytelling this disregard for the extra-organizational problems that impact upon our working lives is striking for it suggests that, while the excellence project celebrates 'soft' skills, bearhugs and the 'love' of customers, the

underlying calculus of this business philosophy remains hard-edged and cold-hearted. Indeed our review of Peters' storytelling suggests that the key facets of organizational life promoted by the excellence project – commitment, empowerment, leadership and managerial myth-making – reflect a very narrow form of business accounting; a twisted bottom-line that takes little account of home, hearth and family-life. Our analysis of the rhetorical formulation of excellence, therefore, confirms that this project builds upon the arts of the story-teller in its attempts to refashion management. However, our reflections on the particulars of this storytelling, suggests that this storywork constitutes the foundations for a world of work, staffed by 'willing slaves' (Bunting, 2005).

Yet our analysis does not and cannot end here since our review of the literature on organizational storytelling reminds us that the claims and appeals of the excellence project will have limits. Thus while our retrospective review of the excellence project concedes the organizing potential of narrative, our analysis of storytelling reminds us of the contrary and obdurate nature of more local sensemaking processes, which will persist within, and between, the forms of public speech associated with managerial sensegiving. Indeed with the peculiarities of local sensemaking in mind it is worth pointing out that Peters' storytelling preferences, and his studious silence on matters of organizational insecurity, may help to explain why those organizations vaunted as 'excellent' in 1982 failed to feature on the contemporaneous listings that celebrated 'the best companies to work for' (Mitchell, 1985).

Concluding Comments

This paper has offered a critical review of the nature and processes of popular management. Following Höpfl (1995) we have taken popular management to be a distinctive literary genre directed to the appropriation of emotional and spiritual experience. Furthermore we have argued

that the excellence project occupies a privileged position in this marketplace and constitutes, in fact, the prototype for and the archetype of the literary genre that has been labeled as popular management.

In an attempt to probe the political orientations of guru theory and the organizational outcomes promoted by popular management we have offered a distinctive reanalysis of the excellence project. Building, uniquely, upon a longitudinal analysis of organizational storytelling we have attempted to explore the sensegiving potential *and* the sensemaking limitations of Peters' tales of business excellence. To facilitate this analysis we have embedded Peters' storywork within the schema outlined by Martin et al (1983).

Martin and her colleagues observe that organizational cultures, typically, claim to be unique and would, generally, seek to substantiate this contention through the exhibition of cultural manifestations such as stories. Yet, they argue that when such stories are relayed it soon becomes clear that they are far from unique. Indeed it becomes apparent that key story forms are common across a vast range of cultural formations. Examining the 'scriptal' elements of these stories, Martin et al (1983) argue that seven, key, stories – which are themselves reflective of enduring organizational tensions – are common across organizations, and so, recurrent in daily discourse.

Through our analysis of Peters' storytelling we have demonstrated that the excellence project largely accommodates this schema. In this regard our analysis suggests that while the excellence project is distinctive in its presentation of a narrative account of management it actually uses organizational stories in a rather familiar and conventional manner.

Pursuing the ways in which these, now, more familiar tales act to shape policy and action we have argued that the stories employed within the excellence project are important but problematic because, at the organizational level, they act to domesticate the frictions and stresses of social organization and, in so doing, make *muzak* of the score of economic liberalism. Furthermore our analysis suggests that the excellence project is significant at the level of public policy and has endured in this domain because it has provided politicians and other policy-makers with an effective public rhetoric for an approach to social and economic management that is, otherwise, shocking (Klein, 2008).

Taken as a whole, therefore, our analysis suggests that the excellence project has used storytelling to place a 'velvet boot' (Fairhurst, Cooren and Cahill, 2002) upon a programme of social and economic reform that, if expressed in other terms would be traumatic.

Of course this does not imply that the rhetoric of the excellence project is, in any sense, complete or all-encompassing. Indeed we have attempted to highlight the ways in which local sensemaking processes have out-paced managerial sensegiving on business excellence. Yet this finding provides no grounds for complacency. Building upon a longitudinal analysis of organizational storytelling, therefore, we have attempted to demonstrate why academics should take popular management seriously *and* why we must guard against the rehabilitation of Tom Peters and his excellence project.

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[i] Greatbatch and Clark employ a variant of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA offers analysts an inductive methodology. Perhaps swayed by this inductive approach, Greatbatch and Clark complain that the literature on organizational storytelling proceeds from 'a priori formal definitions' (110) of stories. This, for the authors is a problem because it results in stories being defined in advance by absent academics. Yet in attempting to 'circumvent' (110) this definitional problem Greatbatch and Clark have, in fact, produced a peculiar definition of organizational storytelling that is, in truth, stronger in its 'a priori' reasoning than the alternatives they would critique.

[ii] Stories are plainly resolved as they move towards a conclusion, but not all stories end with 'a solution'. Steinbeck's (1975 [1939]) *Grapes of Wrath,* for example, concludes with a mysterious smile! Interestingly the film adaptation does conclude with 'a solution' insofar as the key actors choose to move on and are, it seems, suddenly energized in their quest to build a new society free from hunger and social dislocation.

[iii] Unless you are Greek! The Greek language does not appear to privilege 'right' above 'left' as so many other languages seem to.

[iv] Søderberg offers a five-fold classification. Unlike Gabriel (2000) she often seems to elide 'stories' and 'narratives', yet her explicit classification of stories is fairly comprehensive and similar to Gabriel's insofar as she suggests that stories are built upon 1) a sequence of events that is 2) narrated retrospectively and from a particular vantage point. Furthermore stories are said 3) to focus upon human action and upon the imputation of human motive, 4) to shape and be shaped by identity and, consequently, should be understood as being 5) co-authored.

[v] The total number of tales listed in Figure Two is slightly different from the count that appeared in Collins (2007; 2008). The up-dated figure reflects the correction of a previous arithmetic error and the addition of a new story to the catalogue, which had previously been regarded as an element of a larger tale.

[vi] Limitations of space prevent a fuller explanation of the decision-making processes that led to each story being assigned to a particular scriptal type.

[vii] Discussing the genesis of *In Search of Excellence*, Hyatt (1999) observes that at the outset 'the authors were using…a standard-issue academic approach' but this 'bombed' with clients. Furthermore he suggests

that the text only began to acquire a receptive audience when the authors had switched to ‘an anecdotal approach’.