

## MITI E SIMBOLI

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Myths and symbols, organizational

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The constructs 'organizational myth' and 'organizational symbol' first made their appearance in organizational and managerial studies in the second half of the 1970s, at a time of renewed and rapidly spreading interest in the cultural study of organizations. This interest was manifest in two main currents of study: the macro perspective of 'new institutionalism' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Powell and Di Maggio 1991), which explored the ways in which cultural values shape organizational forms – and induce the organizations that populate a particular 'field' (a territory, an industrial sector, or a distinct sphere of institutional life) to grow similar rather than dissimilar (see Institutional theory) – and the micro perspective of 'organizational symbolism' (Dandridge et al. 1980, Pondy et al. 1983, Turner 1990), which viewed individual organizations as 'cultures' characterized by distinct paradigms, to be then analysed not only in their instrumental and economic aspects but also in their ideational and symbolic ones, using holistic and interpretative research models (see Cultures, organizational). In what follows, described first are the essential features of organizational symbolism, since this has been the intellectual context within which the constructs analysed have been largely developed. Then presented is a typology of the symbolic languages to be observed in organizations, with brief descriptions of their main functions. Discussed finally is the function performed by the saga – defined as a 'collection of myths' – in shaping organizational identity, and the function of 'mediatory myths' in managing the dialectical relation between organizational ideology and operational necessity.

### 1. Organizational symbolism

Born at the end of the 1970s as a marginal and nonconformist phenomenon, this intellectual movement rapidly grew into one of the main currents of thought in organizational studies. It produced an extraordinary flourishing of studies and research, gaining unusual popularity even outside the academic sphere. Most notable among the numerous surveys of this body of literature are the following: Alvesson and Berg (1992), a particularly thorough treatment which reviews the various theoretical perspectives that have developed internally to the movement, and discusses the relevance of symbolism to managerial practice; Trice and Beyer (1993), which provides a detailed picture of the material set out in numerous empirical research studies; and Jones (1996), which gives an overview of the main methodological issues connected with the study of organizational symbolism.

Although the approach employed by the movement's exponents was often presented as radically innovative, it was in fact deeply rooted in the social sciences. Despite their frequent use of anthropological terms and concepts, scholars of organizational cultures more frequently acknowledge their intellectual indebtedness to certain currents of sociological thought – in particular to phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and above all to the great ethnographic tradition of urban and occupational sociology (e.g. Whyte 1955, Becker 1951, Roy 1961). However, although an approach inspired by the same theoretical ideas had already been used in the study of formal organizations (see in particular: Selznick 1949, Gouldner 1954, Blau 1955, Dalton 1959, Crozier 1967), until the early 1970s organizational and managerial studies were indubitably dominated by a rationalist and positivist paradigm which viewed the analysis of relations among objective and measurable variables as the central concern of research, and substantially neglected the notion of culture. Ironically, many of these analyses were conducted in the name of Max Weber (Ouchi and Wilkins 1985), regarded as the founding father of organizational theory, but they ignored Weber's invitation to see organizations as the expression of cultural values, interpreting his bureaucratic model instead as the organizational model par excellence and with no alternatives (Clegg 1995). In one of the first essays devoted expressly to organizational symbolism, Dandridge et al. (1980: 77)

wrote that: "...a survey of major texts within the field of organizational behavior establishes clearly that there are virtually no references to the phenomenon that is the subject of this paper...For all practical purposes...it is as if the phenomenon did not exist or was not important." In effect, in those years the statement that organizations have their own myths and symbols would have seemed at most a paradox, almost an oxymoron, to the extent that formal organizations – especially economic ones – were regarded as utilitarian forms of social aggregation in which individual and collective behaviors were governed mainly by norms of instrumental rationality (see Organization, general). If modern organizations are, by definition, the domain of a legal-rational ethos, and characterized by pragmatic behaviors shaped by the practical goals to which they are directed, how can these organizations possibly harbor expressive and disinterested behaviors shaped by impulses and emotions? And if these forms of behavior do exist, how can they be anything but secondary, irrelevant, or at any rate dysfunctional and therefore to be eliminated? Organizational symbolism challenges these prevalent opinions and invites us to read organizations in a completely different light. As Turner (1990) observes, "...the current growth of interest in organizational symbolism and corporate culture points to the end of an era. Looking anew at the organizational world we can see that it is a sensual and emotional realm, replete with its own ceremonies, rites and dramas."

The cultural approach asserts that every productive practice is determined equally by the practical requirements from which it springs and by particular visions of the world. No productive practice is only and exclusively such, for it is simultaneously a symbolic practice, a way to appropriate reality by imposing one's own specific view of what reality is. Accordingly, scholars of organizational cultures have explored the interweaving of technical requirements and expressive needs, the ritualistic significance of apparently rigorously pragmatic behaviors and processes, the overlapping of ideological prejudice and mythic knowledge with scientific expertise. In other words, they have shown that culture and utility are woven together in even the most strictly utilitarian forms of social aggregation. From this perspective, therefore, organizations – and their environments – are conceived as 'symbolic fields': that is, as inter-subjectively negotiated systems of meaning recognizable in a coherent set of symbols or conventional representations of important and complex aspects of organizational and social reality. Decoding an organization's symbolic field involves analysis of its answers to such fundamental questions as, for example, the reliability or unreliability of human beings, the symmetry or asymmetry of social relations, the type of relationship – dominance, harmony, or subordination – with the external environment, the nature of reality and of truth, and so on.

## 2. Organizational symbols: types and functions

The definition of 'symbol' most widely used by scholars of organizational cultures is the one provided by Cohen (1976: 23): "Symbols are objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel men to action". Organizational symbols are normally grouped into three categories corresponding to the three main systems for expressing beliefs and cultural values within an organization: verbal language, behavioral language, and the language of objects.

### 2.1 Verbal symbols

Principal among verbal symbols is language itself, with its ability to categorize and articulate experience using specific 'jargons', which may differ even among organizations operating in the same context and speaking the same language. The category of verbal symbols also comprises linguistic artifacts like legends, stories, slogans, the names given to places, persons, events, and myths. The latter can be defined as dramatized accounts of events whose veracity is asserted as dogma, or is taken for granted, and which have the effect of legitimating and making desirable the behavior enacted in the events narrated and the ideas from which such behavior springs. To the extent that the cadence of organizational life is set by the alternation of crucial experiences – which jeopardize its identity and sometimes its very survival – with periods of relative stability, myths are often the idealization of the specific ways in which those difficulties have been overcome, and they shape the routines that orient behavior during periods of stability. Consequently, the myths most frequently encountered in organizations relate to their birth (myth of the origin) and to the transformations induced by traumatic events (the death of the founder, for example, or a slump in the market). In all organizations, the beliefs and values that myths embody exert a pervasive influence on decisions (see Decision-making in organizations), and it is difficult not to discern an element of 'mythic knowledge' even in decisions apparently taken solely on technical-scientific grounds. However, it has been pointed out that the more decisions are operational, and the effects of actions measurable, the more decisions are taken following principles of instrumental rationality, and the broader the range of options and viable choices available. By contrast, the more choices are general and tied to the base values on which the organization grounds its identity, the more restricted the range of options, and the more mythical, pre-scientific and unamenable to the scrutiny of reason and experience becomes the knowledge utilized (Gagliardi 1986).

### 2.2 Symbolic actions

Of particular importance among the symbolic manifestations represented by acts and styles of behavior are

rites and ceremonials as emotionally charged collective actions – usually performed in a rigorously prescribed sequence – by means of which an organizational community celebrates its successes, heroes, and organizational ideals. Various classifications of organizational rites – which assume a wide variety of connotations – have been proposed, as well as analysis of their manifest and covert cultural consequences (Trice and Beyer 1984). Among the most frequently observable rites are:

• rites of passage (for example, training seminars as a prelude to a promotion), which ease the transition of individuals to new roles and status;

• rites of enhancement (like the awarding of bonuses for outstanding performance), which consolidate the social identities of the rewarded and induce others to emulate them;

• rites of degradation (like the replacement of senior managers for some reason deemed unworthy), which solemnly and publicly reaffirm the importance of the social roles compromised by the behavior of the persons degraded;

• rites of integration (like the celebrations organized by businesses on special occasions like Christmas or the anniversary of the company's foundation), which encourage shared feelings of equality and participation in a common enterprise, temporarily suspending the norms which sanction differences in power and status, but implicitly reaffirm the adequacy of those rules in day-to-day life;

• rites of renewal (like the periodic drawing up of strategic plans), which reassure the organization's members that it is keeping up with the times and that present problems will be overcome, but at the same time bolster the legitimacy of existing systems of power and authority.

### 2.3 The language or artifacts

A third system of symbols is constituted by material artifacts, or the intentional products of human action which exist in the organization independently of their creator and which can be perceived by the senses: products, images, buildings, furnishings, arrangements of physical space. Given the durability of physical matter, artifacts are able tenaciously and incessantly to transmit particular messages and cultural stimuli, thereby encouraging the diffusion and sharing of special 'modes of feeling' in ways that are all the more efficient because they evade intellectual control (Gagliardi 1990).

### 3. The role of the saga in the process of institutionalization

The organizational myths of origin and transformation are often blended together in a 'saga' or an account of an 'extraordinary' series of events which traverses and unifies the various phases of the organization's evolution. In a saga, historical facts are embellished by subsequent re-elaborations, inconsistencies are eliminated or justified, and the rational explanation of how certain means lead to certain ends acquires an affective connotation which transforms the workplace into a loveable and loved institution. The saga therefore performs an essential role in the process of institutionalization: that is, in the process by which the organization, from a sterile mechanical apparatus for the efficient distribution and co-ordination of tasks, becomes imbued with values and acquires a distinctive 'character'. This character on the one hand underpins the collective identity and sentiment of belonging of the organization's members, while on the other it legitimates the organization in the social environment (Selznick 1957). "Whether developed primarily by management or by employees, the story helps rationalize for the individual his commitment of time and energy for years, perhaps for a life-time, to a particular enterprise. Even when weak, the belief can compensate in part for the loss of meaning in much modern work, giving some drama and some cultural identity to one's otherwise entirely instrumental efforts. At the other end of the continuum, a saga engages one so intensely as to make his immediate place overwhelmingly valuable. It can even produce a distortion, with the organization becoming the only reality, the outside world becoming illusion" (Clark 1972: 179). To the extent that the saga generates a shared conviction that the organization is unique because it has been the protagonist of an unusual enterprise crowned by extraordinary success – a conviction which induces individuals to remain within the system, endeavoring to improve it rather than pursuing their interests elsewhere – the saga may constitute a precious organizational resource. Indeed, ensuring the stable participation and constant commitment of its members is one of the crucial problems faced by any co-operative system constructed to pursue specific ends.

### 4. Mediatory myths

In that, as mentioned in section 1, the dialectical relation between expressive needs and pragmatic exigencies unavoidably conditions the lives of organizations, a further crucial organizational problem is the management of the contradictions, tensions and psychological costs that derive from that relation: mediatory myths are discursive formulations which make contradictions acceptable.

Unlike the myths of origin and transformation, which mainly orient actions to be undertaken, mediatory myths provide retrospective justification for previous actions and states of affairs. The need to justify concrete action arises, firstly, from the fact that different values may conflict in specific situations – and it is difficult to

comply with one principle without being in breach of another – and secondly from the fact that actions always tend, actually or apparently, to fall short of the ideals that have inspired them, so that there is invariably a gap between ‘what we should do’ and ‘what we are able to do’, between the purity of the ideal and the impurity of the concrete organizational practice. Mediatory myths harmonize conflicting principles, not by means of logical arguments but by means of assertions of fact, and they resolve or reconcile contradictions by simply denying and inverting them, or by holding irreconcilable alternatives in suspension. Abranavel (1983) reports an interesting example of a mediatory myth: that of the ‘wild ducks’ institutionalized at IBM when T.J. Watson Jr. was chief executive officer. The contradiction between the ideology encouraged by Watson, namely that the company’s employees were free to express their individuality, and a corporate reality characterized by rigid training and socialization practices was resolved by institutionalizing the myth that the employees were like wild ducks: they could not be tamed but nevertheless flew in formation and did not choose their migratory route.

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## RIVINCITA GRATUITA

The Revenge of Gratuitousness on Utilitarianism.

An Investigation into the Causes and Consequences of a Collective Repression (\*)

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(\*) An earlier version of this essay was presented at a Seminar on 'Forms and Values of Gratuitousness', promoted by the Giorgio Cini Foundation (Venice, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, September 2002). My experience in the field of ethnographic research induces me to believe that in every culture there exist polarities expressing an opposition or complementarity between extremes, and conditioning the way in which members sharing the culture perceive, analyze and structure their experience of reality. It would be difficult to deny that, among these polarities, one that occupies a place of central importance in the developed Western societies is the twofold concept of gratuitousness/utility: the distinction between 'gratuitous' action for which no recompense or reward is expected, and 'interested' action intended to procure a specific benefit – of whatever kind – for the actor. The gratuitousness/utility binomial also evokes the more general distinction between expressiveness and instrumentality – between, that is, 'expressive' action (or 'aesthetic' in the general sense of the term) shaped by urges and emotions, and 'impressive' (pragmatic) action moulded by reason in function of the objective or purpose pursued (Witkin, 1974) – and it is contiguous to and partly overlaps with other polarities: art/science, aesthetic-intuitive / logical-scientific knowledge, play/work, contemplation/activity.

Today it is widely recognized that these distinctions do not reflect an order intrinsic in reality; rather, they are culturally determined. As I have argued elsewhere (Gagliardi, 1996), they have ancient roots in the Western societies, but they reinforced and amplified themselves beneath the rational utilitarianism which spread from the second half of eighteenth century onwards and unmistakably characterized that profound cultural transformation which we customarily identify with the advent of 'modernity', and which Max Weber called the 'disenchantment' of the world. Whilst during the Renaissance, art and technique, functionality and beauty, logic and eloquence were difficult to separate, both conceptually and in the organization of social life, with the scientific and industrial revolution these 'distinctions' turned into 'dichotomies', and precise hierarchies gradually arose among the values to which these dichotomies referred: logical-scientific knowledge asserted itself as a superior form of knowledge over aesthetic-intuitive knowledge; the beautiful and the gratuitous were subordinated to the useful and the practical; activity – connected with the exercise of the cognitive faculties of the intellect and its products (science and technology) – was conceptually and socially separated from contemplation and imagination, relegated to the secondary sphere of consumption and leisure; and work and production were accorded greater importance than play and idleness. In this cultural climate, the 'bureaucratic' model of administration, grounded on the principles of instrumental rationality, legality and certainty, gradually supplanted other forms of administration of the economy and the state by virtue of its intrinsic technical superiority. Within society, utilitarian organizations – that is, forms of social aggregation deliberately constructed to achieve specific ends and largely governed by instrumental rationality – progressively replaced or infiltrated, in a relentless process still on-going today, communitarian forms of social aggregation grounded on shared values, traditions and sentiments largely sheltered against the tyranny of 'calculation'.

As a result of these processes, gratuitousness tended to be expelled, or at any rate was considered to be, if not illegitimate, then inappropriate in the world of utilitarian organizations that constituted an increasingly broad sphere of institutional and social life. If modern organizations are by definition the domain of a legal-rational ethos and are characterized by pragmatic forms of behavior shaped by the practical ends to which they are directed, they cannot accommodate expressive and disinterested behaviors driven by impulses, emotions and ideal aspirations. And if these behaviors do exist within organizations, they can only be

secondary, irrelevant, probably harmful, and therefore to be eliminated. The thesis that I shall seek to demonstrate – from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge – is that the spread of these conceptions and cultural attitudes has had two crucial consequences: (i) gratuitousness and expressiveness, as irrepressible human needs, have been crushed ‘at the door’, so to speak, of utilitarian organizations, but then have surreptitiously re-entered through the window, camouflaging themselves in forms that render them difficult to recognize and enable them to evade the mechanisms of social censorship which protect the image of organizations as the uncontested domain of instrumental rationality; (ii) the expert knowledge produced about organizations – in that particular branch of social theory which is the theory of complex organizations – has for more than eighty years ignored (if we can date the origins of discipline to the beginning of the last century and the studies by Taylor), the expressive dimension of organizational life. From this point of view, the scientific community of organizational scholars has displayed an astonishing sort of collective repression. In what follows, I shall first examine the forms taken by this repression and the expedients used both to reduce the cognitive dissonance inevitably provoked by evidence of what has been repressed, and to justify that evidence when realistically surrendering to it.

If we rapidly review the history of organizational thought, we note that until the end of the 1930s organizations were described as impeccable social architectures governed by universal laws and administered in accordance with universal principles. This conceptualization is in part understandable, to the extent that organization theory at that time was essentially normative theory, in that it sought to identify the features that an organization ‘should’ have, rather than investigating the functioning mechanisms of real organizations. However, any normative science (i.e. a discipline defined by a task to undertake rather than by an object to analyze) is founded on positive sciences (or sciences of the object), and just as the science of constructions cannot disregard, for example, the laws of physics, so a science that seeks to identify the constructive principles of a social system able to cooperate to achieve a specific end cannot disregard, for example, the psychological laws that influence the human willingness to cooperate. Although in those years psychoanalysis had already brought to light the complexity and ambiguity of the workings of the psyche, organization scholars preferred to base their normative theorems on a single utilitarian postulate: that individuals will cooperate in achievement of a collective end only if they receive material and direct benefits in exchange.

Even when, at the end of the 1930s in the United States, the first large-scale empirical research took place on the conditions that favor the productivity of human labor – the celebrated Hawthorne Experiments – the hypotheses which the project set out to test were wholly inspired by rationalist utilitarianism: it was assumed that people work more if they receive more in terms of pay, physical comfort, and pace of work. And it was the Hawthorne Experiments that first obliged organization scholars to reckon with gratuitousness, because they showed that the workers increased their productivity not because of better lighting, longer breaks or higher wages, but only because they wanted to ‘please’ the researchers, with whom they had spontaneously established ‘human’, disinterested relations. The conclusions were soon drawn: emphasis was placed not on the gratuitous nature of the action but on the importance of the sentiments in determining any whatever action. Sentiments are a resource to be deployed in the achievement of organizational ends, and they are therefore a further factor to consider when constructing the algorithm that establishes the efficiency of a cooperative system. The Hawthorne Experiments gave rise to ‘counselling’ as a corporate function – and as a profession – intended to enhance the psychological well-being assumed to be closely connected with productivity.

From the 1940s onwards, when organizational studies became increasingly characterized as positive science, and interest grew in the explanation of the functioning mechanisms of real organizations, the focus was still on the instrumental, material and measurable aspects of the phenomena observed. The widespread and implicit idea that organizations are the social artifacts which best embody the rationalist ideal of modernity filtered the interpretation of data: the company was viewed as essentially an ‘economy’ and not as a community, and the concrete behaviors observed were analyzed in terms of their distance or divergence – which was to be corrected – from the cognitive and values-driven components of the implicit model to which reference was being made. Philip Selznick (1949), who was seemingly influenced by the cynical tradition of European political science, when analyzing the history of the T.V.A. (the agency created by the U.S. federal government to develop the Tennessee Valley), lucidly argued that all rationally designed ‘organizations’ become ‘institutions’. That is to say, they gradually lose their purity as sterile mechanical apparatuses for the efficient distribution and coordination of tasks and become, to use Selznick’s apt phrase, “infused with” ideality and gratuitousness beyond the specific exigencies of the technical task to perform, and thereby acquire their own distinctive character over time.

Selznick considered this process to be pathological. Symptomatically, when applying notions developed by clinical psychology to social systems, he defined informal organization and ideology as ‘defence

mechanisms': just as in the development of the personality there exist unconscious urges whose expression the super-ego or society prohibits and which are then transformed by means of defensive and adaptive mechanisms, so the organizational system has needs that cannot be legitimately expressed in the formal organization and which seek an outlet on the one hand in the spontaneity of everyday informal activities and relations, and on the other in the idealization of the organization's role and 'character'. If these ideals are appreciated for themselves and not as instrumental to the organization's original or primary purpose, the process of institutionalization, which turns the organization into a desirable object of identification for individuals and a vehicle of collective gratification, is intrinsically a 'degenerative' process.

Although Selznick's realistic and interpretative approach was taken up by other scholars – in particular Gouldner (1954), Blau (1955), Dalton (1959) and Crozier (1967) –, until the early 1970s organization and management studies were largely dominated by a rationalist and positivist paradigm which imposed the analysis of relations among objective and measurable variables as the prime purpose of research and ignored the ideational and symbolic aspects of organizational life. It was only at the end of the 1970s that there arose a renewed interest in the cultural study of organizations, from the macro perspective of 'new institutionalism' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and Di Maggio, 1991) and the micro perspective of 'organizational symbolism' (Dandridge et al. 1980, Pondy et al. 1983, Turner 1990). The latter intellectual movement, in particular, suggested to consider organizations as 'cultures' characterized by distinct paradigms to be analysed using holistic and interpretative methods. Despite attempts by the custodians of the dominant paradigm to restrict this movement's spread by means of mechanisms for the social control of intellectual output (Cummings & Frost, 1995), it rapidly became one of the main currents of thought in organization studies, and it produced an extraordinary abundance of studies and research. The intellectual manifesto of the symbolist approach can be summed up by Duby's (1986) observation that every productive practice is equally determined by the practical exigencies that have engendered it and by particular world-views; and that no productive practice is exclusively such, because it simultaneously becomes a symbolic practice, a way of appropriating reality by imposing one's particular view of reality upon it.

Scholars of organizational cultures showed that organizations are replete with sensual and emotional experiences, rituals, ceremonies and dramas. They explored the interweaving between technical requirements and expressive needs, fully highlighting the forms assumed by the gratuitous in utilitarian organizations. They showed that usually gratuitous actions evade social censorship by disguising themselves as pragmatic actions: gratuitousness has learned to appear useful in order to survive. (Actually, also the opposite happens, so that pragmatic actions camouflage themselves as generosity: when a company executive was asked about the role of gift-giving in his organization, he cited the gold Rolex watch presented to employees on achieving a certain seniority; but the tax authorities had already determined the strictly retributive nature of these 'gifts', the value of which was stated on the pay packet and subject to tax! More generally, ceremonial compliance with institutionalized myths and values, though loosely coupled with organizational operations, may serve very practical purposes of legitimation and accreditation).

Relying on empirical findings of organizational culture research, I submit that the forms assumed by gratuitousness in utilitarian organizations can be classified into four basic types: informal everyday gratuitousness, behaviors expressing 'substantial rationality', ritual squandering, and 'innocent ornaments'.

1. Informal everyday gratuitousness. The first category comprises the gratuitous actions undertaken, as Selznick pointed out, within the framework of the informal organization (gifts, celebrations, favors, and every other token of affect and esteem among persons), recognized as such and tolerated – within limits of space and time implicitly and, usually, rigidly defined – in the name of the alleged, and already-mentioned, relation between satisfaction and productivity.

2. Behaviors expressing substantial rationality. Forms of behavior inspired by organizational values – and which are therefore manifestations of 'substantial rationality' – are not usually justified as such, but rather are put forward as 'instrumental' to the solution of concrete problems facing the organization, even when they prove not to be functional to the purpose. These actions, which are also gratuitous in the sense that they are inappropriate to the circumstances, are not only tolerated but encouraged by the organizational culture, in that they are inspired by models of behavior which in the past have generated gratification and success, and as a consequence have been idealized. They are likelt to be obstinately and compulsively reiterated despite their obvious failure to solve problems, and they seem to be the most frequent cause of the decline and 'death' of utilitarian organizations (Gagliardi, 1986).

3. Ritual squandering. Connected with the behaviors inspired by substantial rationality is 'ritual squandering' – costly actions touted as functional to the solution of specific operational problems but which in fact serve to solemnize adherence to the founding values of the organizational identity. In the course of these collective

actions, which have strong emotional resonance and are usually performed in a rigorously prescribed sequence, the organizational community celebrates its successes, crowns its heroes, and reaffirms faith in its ideals. What characterizes these processes and makes evident their ritual nature to the external observer is the squandering of resources, which is a means to signify that the values shared are inestimable. For instance, although the justification for some corporate gatherings is that they enhance communication and coordination, their nature as praising rituals is immediately apparent. Carefully organized in luxurious hotels in beautiful surroundings, and standing in stark contrast to the frugal treatment usually accorded to employees on routine business trips, rewards are distributed for outstanding achievements, and thus reinforce the social identities of the members rewarded while motivating the others to emulate them. It is less easy to recognize that planning processes are renewal rituals which satisfy emotional needs but whose practical outcomes are trifling when compared to the enormous quantities of time, energy and resources devoted to them. Broms and Gamberg (1983) have interpreted strategic planning as a form of self-communication, and the strategic plan as a 'mantra' or a mirror in which the organization sees "what it should be like" reflected, a code which transforms the corporate strategy from a formula for action into mythic thought: this transformation makes it difficult to show that resources have been used inefficiently and allows the opposite to be assumed.

An extreme example of ritual squandering is reported by Wright (1979, quoted by Martin and Siehl, 1983) in his description of the culture at General Motors in the 1970s. At that company, testifying to the rigid subordination of the periphery to corporate headquarters and the value of unswerving devotion to top management was – amongst others – the ritual with which executives from headquarters were greeted at the airport as they visited outlying sites, sales subsidiaries, or production plants. The ritual, which for top managers resembled the treatment usually reserved for heads of states on official visits to other countries, was justified on the grounds that the visitor had scant knowledge of the city's layout, so that it was therefore entirely legitimate and practical. In some cases, the deference was on the extraordinary scale described in the following story:

"In preparing for the sales official's trip to this particular city, the Chevrolet zone sales people learned from Detroit that the boss liked to have a refrigerator full of cold beer, sandwiches, and fruit in his room to snack on at night before going to bed. They lined up a suite in one of the city's better hotels, rented a refrigerator, and ordered the food and beer. However, the door to the suite was too small to accommodate the icebox. The hotel apparently nixed a plan to rip out the door and part of the adjoining wall. So the quick-thinking zone sales people hired a crane and operator, put them on the roof of the hotel, knocked out a set of windows in the suite, and lowered and shoved the refrigerator into the room through this gaping hole".

This episode, which was regarded as 'normal' at General Motors, would be stigmatized by auditors, managers or employees of other companies only because they are used to different forms of ritual squandering, of which they are just as unaware as the General Motors employees in the case described by Wright.

4. Innocent ornaments. Examination of the final category – what I have called 'innocent ornaments' – permits reflection on the meager amount of space conceded to beauty by utilitarian organizations. Beauty which is 'useless' (in selling a product, promoting the company's image, or obtaining any other advantage in exchange), as well as play or contemplation, has no place in those organizations. Aesthetic experience – understood in the general sense as sensory experience and not just as experience as what is socially defined as 'beautiful' or as 'art' – is rigidly subordinate to intellectual experience. The language of words as it performs its literal and purely denotative function – written communication, in particular, as the bureaucratic act par excellence – is preferred to other systems of symbolization and communication, and analytical and discursive sequentiality is given priority over the holistic presentation of sensorially perceivable forms. In general, little tolerance is shown for anything expressive of the imagination, of the emotions, or of individualism. The tendency for the big corporations to require their managers to comply with rigidly defined dress codes, as epitomized by the anonymous grey suit, is well known. But the adoption of colorful and informal garb in the entertainment industry expresses an identical cultural pressure for uniformity.

The artifacts resulting from expressive action - and which are not, directly or indirectly, production tools - can therefore only fulfil a decorative function as 'innocent ornaments' which, although they do not serve a practical purpose, are not obtrusive – superfluous forms with no attention-grabbing ambitions. Within these limits, the members of the organization seize every chance to embellish their physical surroundings, and every opportunity afforded by work procedures to beautify the routine of organizational life, giving color – in the literal sense of the word – to the workplace, to a memorandum, to an action, so that they can express their affects and their secret ambitions. But contemporary ethnographic research has shown that these artifacts, given the tendency for matter to endure in time, are able tenaciously and incessantly to transmit

particular cultural messages and stimuli. They thus foster the spread and sharing of special 'modes of feeling' and 'tacit knowledge' in a manner all the more efficacious because it evades intellectual and bureaucratic control. From this point of view, expressive artifacts offer a valuable hermeneutic dimension for interpreting the culture of an organization. They may function as clefs in the collective unconscious which reveal deep-lying modes of feeling different from, or opposed to, the rationalizations that the members of the organization sometimes propound, entirely in good faith, even to themselves (Gagliardi, 1990). For example, an analysis conducted in 1985 of the photographs decorating the annual statements of five leading computer manufacturers for the previous ten years showed that each company had its specific and implicit vision of the outside world (especially the market) and of its relationship with it. Moreover, as one might expect, these visions differed significantly even though the companies all operated in the same sector. Yet the 'theories of the world' embodied in the photographs were radically different from those recounted by the texts, and they provided more plausible explanation for decisions taken regarding organization, technology, or product range (Dougherty and Kunda, 1990). I shall conclude my analysis by recounting an episode that vividly illustrates these dynamics.

Some years ago, I was conducting ethnographic research in the Information Systems Division of a large industrial group. The purpose of the research was to improve relations between the division in question – which handled information services for the entire group – and the operational divisions. The Information Systems division was not generally perceived by its 'customers' as a provider of 'services' but as a power center, striving to impose their diagnoses on the operations heads. Often, it was alleged, the Information Systems Division imposed 'advanced' technical solutions which were unmanageable and pointlessly costly, taking advantage of the fact the 'customers' had no other providers to turn to. The Information Systems Division had responded to accusations of arrogance and 'intellectual dogmatism' by mounting a well-organized campaign of communication, propaganda and training directed at both its 'customers' and its own personnel (the majority of whom were carefully selected information engineers), the intention being to show that its actions were prompted solely by technical rationality and targeted solely on operational efficiency. The results of these efforts had been entirely unsatisfactory, however, and the head of the division showed me the artifacts used during the campaign – booklets, seminar programs, circulars, internal communications – with the disconsolate air of a soldier brooding over his weapons blunted in a lost battle. The item that he showed me with greatest emphasis was a booklet describing the working procedures followed in relations with users, and he carefully explained the 'spirit of service' that had inspired it. The cover of the booklet bore a title consistent with this purpose ('Information Systems Division at the Service of Group XXX'), but my attention was drawn to the innocent illustration that decorated it: a detail from Michelangelo's fresco of the Creation – with the forefingers of God and Adam almost touching – , with two computers instead of the two figures.

[Put the attached picture about here]

I asked whether the image alluded to the relationship between the Information Systems Division and the operational divisions, and then inquired which of the two subjects corresponded to the Almighty. He was taken aback and looked at the image as if for the first time. Then he answered through gritted teeth: "Us, obviously", and after a pause added with evident embarrassment: "I thought it was a good idea. I didn't ask myself why". The gratuitous had once again exacted its revenge on the priests of technical rationality.

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