Four close readings on introducing the literary in organizational research

Christina Volkmann (christina@essex.ac.uk)

Christian De Cock (cdc@essex.ac.uk)

Four close readings on introducing the literary in organizational research

> *Not only has this manuscript nothing to contribute to the field; it would put the field back by at least a decade if it were ever to be published* (reviewer's comment on an earlier version of this chapter submitted to *Organization Studies*[1])

Introduction

In this chapter we will make a case that organization studies texts have tended to reduce literary theory to a static repository of concepts from which argumentative "tools" or theoretical "back-up" can be picked up as and when necessary. A discrete field of study like literary theory thus becomes a kind of supermarket full of material from where individual aspects are taken to reflect on methods for researching organizational "reality" or to theorize on organization in general. Examples include using literary theory as a text-structuring device (e.g. through a "checklist" or a set of labelling devices), as a way of distinguishing "good" from "bad" texts, or as a fixed status symbol by alluding to a string of theorists, novelists or poets whose writings only readers with a sound knowledge of literary theory will be able to appreciate fully and which presupposes a degree of consensus amongst literary scholars which does not exist.

The initial focus of our close reading will be on three texts published in respected organization studies journals during the 1990s (respectively Easton and Araujo, 1997; O'Connor, 1995; Hatch, 1996). Here the authors argue for different, open research approaches and discuss the implications of not being able to fix organizational reality in a way akin to the natural sciences. Yet, at the same time the texts under consideration tend to treat literary theory as a fixed entity which provides an infinite amount of typologies and frameworks (including 2x2 matrices!), thus denying the very implications they aim to discuss for their own discipline. This reduction seems to be symptomatic of the quest for some solid ground to anchor the field of organization studies to. However, because the reduction is just that, and because it fails to take into account the complexity and constant flow and flux within the discipline it is "using" (in this case literary theory), the attempt to find solid ground is doomed to failure.

We will then move on and perform a fourth close reading on the "application" of the work of Wolfgang Iser in organization studies; a body of work which explicitly aims to move beyond typologies in order 'to produce an alternative pattern that can do justice to literature, the fictive, and the imaginary by bringing their limitless aspects into focus' (Iser, 1993: xiv). Iser's work (e.g. on Reception Theory/Reader Response Theory or Games/Play in the literary text) stands out in that it seems to be quoted frequently from paper to paper with a lack of argumentative purpose, thus excluding it from further engagement and consigning it to a kind of shorthand or code for "those in the know." Examples we will investigate in some detail include Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), Czarniawska (1999) and Linstead (2000).

Overview of terminology

In the knowledge of possibly oversimplifying literary terms, we shall attempt a brief clarification of our terminology. *Literature* denotes fictional texts such as novels, unless stated otherwise, for example, when "literature" might stand for the body of texts produced on a certain subject, as in "the literature on discourse". *Literary theory* will refer to what is thought, written, and debated about literature, and the person engaged in such activity will be referred to as "literary scholar". Culler provides the following definition in a classic text:

> 'Literary theory is […] the study of problems about the nature of literature: its forms, its components, their relations. Literary theory is not a set of competing methods for the analysis of literary works – methods that are to be judged by their relevance to problems […] any more than linguistics is a set of competing models that are to be judged by their success in helping puzzled listeners understand obscure utterances' (Culler, 1981/2001: 244).

A term related to, and indeed often used synonymously with, literary theory is that of *literary criticism*. Following Culler's definition, however, we view the latter as closer to a 'set of competing methods for the analysis of literary works' and hence prefer the broader term of *literary theory*. Moreover, the term *literary criticism* is often ambiguous as it can suggest a degree of terminological closeness to specific theoretical directions

such as New Criticism[2] with its text-immanent interpretation. Such connotation would be unfortunate, especially since later the somewhat opposing concept of *Reception Theory/ Reader Response Theory* (RRT) will be discussed. *Literary criticism* is also often connected with the evaluation of literary texts as good or bad literature, a connotation we wish to avoid.

It is in connection with RRT that the concept of the *reader* will be considered, with "reader" referring to the way the reader is inscribed in a text, the way in which the text only happens when being read. Our discussion of the *reader* and RRT in Organization and Management Theory (OMT) texts represents another example of the way in which this concept is used in an isolated way. In organization studies, the concept of the *reader* is a potentially complex one in that it comprises several "readers": Managers (or employees in general) "read" organizations, and so do researchers in the field. There is an interesting twist here in that organizational researchers read as text what managers and employees produce (and read)[3]. The researchers are in turn readers of the texts in their academic community, texts that they themselves contribute to.

Our preliminary reflections on terminology also have to draw attention to a concept central to literary theory and also to organization studies, that of the *text*. Nünning gives the following definition: '[Text is] an instrument of communication through language; colloquially used for the coherent written representation. […] It comprises the written, printed, spoken word, pictorial illustrations, or linguistic conventions which are interpreted by literary scholars' (Nünning, 2001: 625-626; our translation).

In our chapter "text" denotes two things, covering both aspects of this definition although we point out here that we do not wish to conflate literary and non-literary texts. The first aspect is that of "text as organizational reality". This follows DeVault's (1990: 888) idea of 'examining society as text' and also Atkinson and Coffey (1997: 46), who point out '[…] the pervasive significance of documentary records, written and otherwise, in contemporary social settings'. Secondly, "text" describes the works discussed in this chapter and, more generally, the writings in the field of organization studies, which, it could be argued, in turn form a 'society as text', only that "society" in this case is largely

limited to the academic community. Whilst we can find several examples of academic articles which study organizational reality as text (Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993; Ng and De Cock, 2002; Phillips and Brown, 1993), it is without doubt the field itself that has taken centre stage in the past decade and a half, with a focus not so much on the "primary text", but instead on a "second order" text where the field talks about itself (cf. Van Maanen, 1998 or Weick, 1999 for insightful commentary on this reflexive turn).

The use of literary theory in organization studies texts: three close readings
1. "Management Research and Literary Criticism" (Easton and Araujo, 1997)
Geoff Easton and Luis Araujo explore directly the potential of literary theory for the field of organization studies:

> 'If a critical approach is required to examine a body of theory, if its quality is to be evaluated, if it is to be judged, then it seems sensible to borrow some of the ideas that already exist to help the process along... By literature we mean a written work of art which is intended not only to divert and entertain but to provide greater understanding of the world' (Easton and Araujo 1997: 100).

Here Easton and Araujo refer to Horace's famous definition of the purpose of poetry, namely that poetry should *aut prodesse aut delectare* (quoted after Zapf, 1991: 45), i.e. that it should either be useful/instructive or should delight/entertain, and at best combine the two by instructing through entertainment. Interestingly, the "use" of literature, the *prodesse*, is already defined by Easton and Araujo as 'to provide a greater understanding of the world'. It seems that their stated goal of providing a 'somewhat radical alternative' in the 'debate around the issue of whether the field of management studies and its marketing subdiscipline are sciences' (Easton and Araujo, 1997: 99) might prove elusive. If literature has to 'provide a greater understanding of the world', then it is natural to conclude that some form of evaluation is required that would allow to indicate success or failure in providing this understanding of the world. In the case of literature, Easton and Araujo see 'literary criticism' – here used loosely in the context of theory-building – as the authority to pronounce on what is deemed to be good or bad literature and to do so in a well-defined system that it is possible for management research to emulate: 'Literary criticism [...] has developed techniques, *modus operandi* [sic], theoretical underpinnings.

Critics must have a basis upon which they can judge what is good literature, what is "valid". It would be helpful to novice critics such as ourselves if we had some sort of taxonomy of critical theories' (Easton and Araujo 1997: 101; original emphasis).

Easton and Araujo present the body of 'literary criticism' as a well-mapped foreign territory into which students of organization can "foray" in order to bring back pearls of wisdom. Whilst it might be tempting to draw parallels with European colonialism and improvise around a theme from Joseph Conrad here, the straightforward point we want to make is that such "uses" of literature tend to resemble the activities of a raiding party, plundering the wealth of the humanities in order to bring it back to the home discipline. The authors make this altogether plain when they continue: '[T]he schema developed by Abrams (1981) serves our purpose best since it is well articulated and *allows us to place within it the forms of criticism we had already identified a priori*' (Easton and Araujo, 1997: 101; our emphasis). Self-effacingly denying that what they propose is tantamount to a "paradigm shift", Easton and Araujo's "foray into literary criticism" leads them to five conclusions about how to do organization studies: to do more epistemology, to talk more with fellow academics, to read more sociology of knowledge, to read fewer papers more carefully, to be explicit about the criteria by which we critique and to be more reflexive about research and writing (1997: 105). Plus ça change then...

Using individual concepts such as Horacian literary theory, a specific definition of 'literary criticism', or a theoretical classification scheme by Abrams is in itself not necessarily problematic.[4] However, here these concepts are constructed in a way that suggests that – in contrast to organization studies – literary theory as a discipline has solved its epistemological and methodological problems, that it has, for example, achieved closure on whether or not literary theory is a science. This is not the place to discuss either the ongoing epistemological or methodological debates in literary theory or to explore the question whether or not to achieve "science status" would indeed be desirable for any humanities discipline. What should have become clear, however, is that the absence or even denial of such issues from texts like the one by Easton and Araujo poses problems for the way the field of organization studies sees itself. As much as the

authors proclaim their desire to revolutionize their own discipline through an encounter with literary criticism, the ground of organization studies remains remarkably stable and the "other" that they are importing is reified and fixed in a single identity.

2. "Paradoxes of Participation: Textual Analysis and Organizational Change" (O'Connor, 1995)

Whereas Easton and Araujo refer to themselves as 'novice critics', O'Connor openly declares her credentials in connection with literary theory at the end of her article: 'This paper positions a literature Ph.D into the social science field […] Here I had a work which I was confident would have earned me praise in my discipline of origin, but the reviewers of this journal challenged the validity and reliability of my interpretations' (1995: 792). At the outset, O'Connor makes plain her goal: 'This paper applies literary theory, concepts and methods to four accounts of organization [sic] change' (1995: 769). She also aims to 'demonstrate that attention to language, and specifically attention to it in the form of literary analytical methods, reveals the process of cultural production in organizations' (769), whereby her case studies are considered as texts.[5] Somewhat incongruously, her introductory remarks are then followed by an overview of the literature covering the long tradition of the 'interpretive approach' in the social sciences, so that the three theoretical approaches that she chooses, namely theory of rhetoric, narrative, and metaphor, seem already well embedded into the social science literature and are no longer 'direct imports' from literary theory (O'Connor, 1995: 772-773). With this structured threefold approach, literary theory appears to form a solid foundation on which observations on organizational change can be based. This impression is confirmed when O'Connor later refers to a kind of checklist that 'literary criticism' purportedly provides: 'I meet the criteria that Bazerman articulates for literary criticism: my interpretations are consistent with (1)[…] (2)[…] (3)[…]' (O'Connor, 1995: 795). She also takes care to defend herself against the possible accusation of arbitrariness, revealing what almost looks like mistrust of the possibility of multiple interpretations: 'This paper is no accident; it is to some extent the story of my professional life, but neither is my reading of the texts a Rohrschach [sic]' (O'Connor, 1995: 795).

O'Connor's own references to literary theory seem rather less well structured. Our example is taken from the section on the 'Analysis of the Texts' (1995: 775 ff.). The context is the 'Theory of Metaphor'. No fewer than seven literary theorists, poets and philosophers are mentioned in the space of the two paragraphs opening the section:

> 'As Saint Augustine observed, language does not present – rather, it represents. […] The very phenomenon of language itself is metaphor (Shelley […]). Burke, citing Bentham, states that language follows from the concrete to the abstract […]. Brodsky's observations about poetic language may be applied more universally to language as a whole […] "Metaphor", says Aristotle, "is the application of the name of a thing to something else" […] This movement in language, or turn, is described by de Man as error […]' (1995: 787).

Here the general references to famous names open up scope for misunderstanding rather than clarify the concept of metaphor. For example, the reference to Shelley triggers a whole set of possible associations with Romanticism in general, or in particular Shelley's view of language and the nature and possible function of literature in his *Defence of Poetry* of 1821 (comp. Zapf, 1991: 110-115). For literary scholars these references encompass a vast area of study and very likely one of considerable debate, too. Quoting a string of famous names closes the concept of metaphor by referring it to "authorities". It also looks rather like short-hand or a code for "those in the know", which – now again on the meta-level – says more about the textual strategies the author feels she needs to employ than about metaphor.

3. "The Role of the Researcher: An Analysis of Narrative Position in Organization Theory" (Hatch, 1996)

Mary Jo Hatch's article draws on literary theory to address an epistemological problem, namely the 'crisis of representation [that] finally reached organization theory in the early 1990s' (Hatch, 1996: 359). It may seem odd for Hatch to "consult" literary theory in this context because she sees it as having at least partly brought the crisis about, a crisis with 'roots that extend to philosophy and literary theory, the deepest of which run to linguistics' (1996: 359). And yet, she states emphatically: "I believe […] that

application of literary theory to organizational text and issues opens organizational enquiry to new possibilities" (1996: 360; our emphasis). She then shifts her focus away from 'organizational text and issues' to the person of the researcher, thus moving to a different position in the imaginary triangle of *Author/Narrator–Text–Reader*. It is the narrative theory of the French literary scholar Gérard Genette that Hatch chooses as the central theoretical concept for her argument:

> 'This study continues exploration of narration in organization theory by focusing on the literary concept of narrative position as developed by Genette (1980, 1982, 1988, 1992) in his theory of narratology. […] My thesis is that application of Genette's theory can help us to more clearly formulate the role of the researcher by identifying it with the positioning of the narrator of a literary text' (Hatch, 1996: 361).

This approach is very different to O'Connor's who had referred to a number of literary theory concepts in order to support her argument. We have criticised O'Connor's "use" of literary theory as unhelpful, thereby perhaps inadvertently implying that the opposite, i.e. the reference to a specific model, would be more successful, and it is from this angle that we will now consider Mary Jo Hatch's approach. With 'Four Narrative Positions'[6] which she organizes into a matrix 'in Relation to Voice and Perspective', Hatch provides a considerable amount of detail in adapting, or in her words, 'applying' Genette's *narratology* (Hatch, 1996: 362, comp. Fig. 2). Given that the 'researcher as narrator' is the focus of Hatch's study, it strikes us as curious that in this matrix she twice conflates narrator and author ('Agatha Christie narrating Hercule Poirot' and 'Fielding in Tom Jones'; 1996: 362)[7], which is certainly unusual and which sits uneasily with Hatch's specialised exposition of narrative theory in connection with the 'role of the researcher'.

Genette's pioneering development of a terminology and of a structuralist taxonomy of narrative theory is generally seen as his main contribution to literary theory. Whilst his work is generally well-accepted amongst narrative theorists, it is nevertheless extremely complex and difficult to understand for non-experts and therefore a rather curious choice for "application" to a different discipline. In his *Narrative Discourse* (1980), one of the

titles Hatch refers to, Genette takes the narrative of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* as the text basis for the explication of his narrative theory; certainly not an easy text, even for a reader well-versed in French literature. Moreover, the application here of theories of the fictional or literary text to texts in organization studies would, in our view, necessitate at least some theoretical consideration.

In view of the extensive use Hatch makes of the 'Four Narrative Positions', it is perhaps precisely the taxonomies and terminologies in Genette's theory that appeal to her as an organization theorist who has set out to "prove" that the researcher is not (any longer) an objective observer. If this were the case, however, she would be reintroducing "through the back door" the scientific objectivity she claims to refute. In this context, Deetz (1996) not only criticises Mary Jo Hatch's textual strategy, he also points out its implications for the field of organization studies:

> 'Hatch's own explicit rewriting of literary theory into the subjective/objective discourse happens throughout the article […]. The interest in examining the Hatch piece is in seeing how she accomplishes translations, which reinstate older epistemological battles and remove the more radical impact of new conceptions. […] Such translations isolate organizational theory from the deeper challenges of contemporary social theories […]' (Deetz, 1996: 388).

Rather than opening "new possibilities" for organization studies, Genette's narratology, in Hatch's case, provides the author with a textual-strategic tool for the support of her arguments, be they in the context of the subjectivity of the researcher, the 'editorial suppression of what are essentially subjectivist narrative styles' (Hatch, 1996: 368), or the possible 'direct benefit for managers' of her analysis (1996: 372). The strategy is likely to appear successful because Genette's model (although naturally not the only view of narrative theory) is well-accepted and sufficiently uncontroversial within literary theory to be rejected, a fact that may make it more "applicable" to the field of organization studies. At the same time, however, this model is likely to be too complex and inaccessible for the fellow organizational researcher/reviewer/editor to raise questions about or to discuss in detail. In a later article on complexity theory and

organizational complexity, Genette's theory resurfaces without adaptation or change (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001: esp. 997, 1000). This rather confirms our suspicion that the literary theoretical concept is deployed as a textual device instead of being allowed to contribute to any theoretical debate in hand.[8]

Reflecting on the Reader with Wolfgang Iser

Thus far, we have explored three examples to illustrate how OMT texts make use of literary theory, either as a discipline in general (Easton and Araujo, 1997; O'Connor, 1995), or by referring to the work of an individual literary theorist (Genette's narratology in Hatch, 1996 and Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). We will now extend our exploration to a concept that reoccurs in OMT texts and at the same time constitutes a major area of literary theory: the *reader*. Wolfgang Iser and *Reader Response Theory* (RRT) are likely to be the name/term most often associated with the concept of the *reader*[9]: 'Through the concentration on the role of the reader, [RRT] was mainly a counter-reaction to formalist and structuralist approaches […] as well as to the representation aesthetics of the New Criticism' (Nünning, 2001: 549; our transl.).

There seems to be a marked difference between the way in which RRT is treated in the OMT texts we consider here and the uses of literary theory we have discussed above. RRT and related concepts are not so much called upon explicitly but seem to permeate the texts in a curious way. For Karen Golden-Biddle and Karen Locke, for example, the reader is the 'researcher reader' mentioned above: 'Viewing the written work as "text" highlights how rhetoric and the interactive researcher-text and reader-text relationships are inseparable from the discussion of convincing' (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993: 596). In this context, the authors also refer to Wolfgang Iser to support their argument regarding the 'interactive researcher-text and reader-text relationships': 'The discussion is informed by a long tradition of scholarship in the humanities, especially literature and the discipline of literary criticism (cf. Booth 1961, 1967; Iser 1989), which rhetorically analyzes written work as "texts" to be constructed and interpreted' (1993: 596). Barry and Elmes (1997:438) also refer to 'the perspective of reader/response theory (cf. Iser, 1989)' in their narrative analysis of strategic discourse. They state: 'The interplay of

text, author, and reader suggests that the interpretation of a text is both pluralistic and dynamic, reflecting the author's intent and the reader's construction of meaning' (1997: 438). Note that 'a text' here is separated from the context of the literary and applied in the authors' exploration of 'strategic management as a form of fiction' (1997: 429). The references to Iser are not elaborated upon in either article, yet at the same time they open up a vast field of possible reference points, some of which we shall attempt to sketch out in this section.

Iser's 1989 book *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, which both articles refer to, develops Iser's ideas about the role of literature, the reader and the text. The term *literary anthropology* was first used by F. Poyatos in 1977, for whom 'literatures [are] archives of anthropologically relevant data' (Nünning, 2001: 374; our translation). Within literary theory, the concept is controversial because many theorists reject the idea of literary texts as a source of data. Wolfgang Iser discusses this theoretical approach from a different angle, exploring areas such as the "Fiktionsfähigkeit" (*fiction-ability*) or the "Fiktionsbedürftigkeit" (the *need for fiction*) in human beings. Theoretical considerations of this kind, although related, appear to be somewhat removed from the relatively simple statement in which they are referenced in the articles cited above.

Golden-Biddle and Locke also refer to one of Iser's by now "classic" texts, namely *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976/1978), again, as in the passage discussed above, without further explanation: 'Finally, the metaphor of the text suggests that because all texts are addressed to an audience, that is are intended to communicate, they are rhetorical (Burke 1950, Booth 1961, Iser 1978)' (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993: 597). At the beginning of the following paragraph they state: 'The above discussion emphasizes that reading is an interactive process in which readers not only receive the text and its appeals to engage it [sic] and find it convincing, but also act on the text to create interpretations' (1993: 597). Although Wolfgang Iser is not directly referenced here, elements of his theory are nevertheless recognisable, for example in the 'interactive process of reading' or the 'appeal of a text'.[10] 'Die Appellstruktur der Texte.'

[The Appeal Structure of Texts.] was the title of Iser's 1967 inaugural lecture in Konstanz, and it was here that he formulated first what later became the central ideas of his theories. For Iser, the "real" or historical reader is not identical with the *Implied Reader*, which is a theoretical construct designed to move away from the 'interferences of the socio-psychologically coded reality of the historic author and the (real) reader' (Nünning, 2001: 375; our translation). The reader is inscribed in the text as a *Leerstelle* (gap or indeterminacy): 'Unlike the real historical or contemporary reader, unlike the fictive reader whom the author addresses in a novel, the *implied reader* is a theoretical construct without empirical existence, for he represents the entire potential of a text that may unfold in the course of the reading process' (Zima, 1999: 74; original emphasis).

Barbara Czarniawska (1999) refers to Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish in a context similar to that of Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993). In her discussion of 'The Narrative in Social Sciences and Organization Studies' (Czarniawska, 1999: 14ff.), she critiques their view of how ethnographic texts convince their readers: 'Unfortunately, like the positivist criteria they criticize, these are again *ostensive* criteria of a text's success - that is, the attributes of a text can be demonstrated and therefore applied a priori to determine a text's success' (Czarniawska, 1999: 27; original emphasis). Interestingly, the only reference to Wolfgang Iser and RRT in her book follows immediately afterwards:

> 'Reader-response theory has counteracted such objectivist reading theories (Iser 1978)[11], but, in turn, it tries to subjectivize the act of reading and therefore neglects the institutional effect. […] The pragmatist theory of reading to which I adhere, best known in the rendition of Stanley Fish but here represented by Rorty […] gives preference to *performative* criteria' (1999: 27).[12]

Mentioning Iser's theory does not seem to serve any purpose in Czarniawska's book. Indeed, it is Rorty whom she continues to refer to.[13] Also, it is curious that the reference should occur in the passage critiquing Golden-Biddle and Locke's views who had themselves referred to Iser. In view of the complexities of Iser's theoretical edifice and its potential implications for OMT, it is somewhat puzzling to find it referenced more or less "in passing". The situation here is similar to that of Hatch's use of Genette's theory

where the latter was a textual strategic device (as RRT seems to be for Czarniawska). In Golden-Biddle and Locke, the references are "just there", permeating the text. In this form, literary theory is hard to engage with in terms of its relevance to OMT precisely because of the vagueness of the reference. The opportunity for theorising the r*eader* in terms of RRT is hence largely lost.

In defence of Czarniawska, it has to be said that ten years on she offers a much more careful reading of Iser (Czarniawska, 2009). For example, she points out Iser's central concern with 'fictionalizing acts' (2009: 358) and emphasizes the crucial point that 'Iser would have liked the models to vanish altogether, as he clearly preferred "operational" to "architectural" theories. His aims were of course, connected to the aims of literary theory, and not organization theory; a literary anthropology would, among other things, answer the question of why literature exists' (Czarniawska, 2009: 360). Whilst we are not necessarily convinced either by her defence of the realist novel or her argument that 'there is a strong similarity between a researcher reading an annual report and a literary critic reading a novel'[14], at the very least her engagement with Iser's work provides a basis that makes possible a critique of or disagreement with arguments put forward.

Iser developed his theories, first on the reader/RRT and later also on literary anthropology, over more than three decades, with his last theoretical contribution, *The Range of Interpretation*, published in 2000[15]. One particular theme permeates his work, indicating how broadly Iser conceives of the reader concept: 'Already motivating Iser's reader-response theory, the question of why we need fictions links the different phases and decades of Iser's work and continues to inform his recent turn to literary anthropology' (Schwab, 2000: 74).

Iser's work has also generated a substantial amount of discussion. For example, in 2000 *New Literary History* published a special issue on Iser. Thomas (2000) charts in detail the reception of Iser's earlier works in the United States and in Britain, with a particular focus on the attacks on Iser by Fish and Eagleton, which Thomas views as having

contributed to a lack of reception of Iser's later works. Thomas points out that these often clarify 'some of the confusion that his earlier work on the act of reading generated' (Thomas, 2000: 14). What becomes very clear in this later work is Iser's 'resistance to manifestation' and his 'insistence on the irreducible openness of the aesthetic realm' (Schwab, 2000: 74,78). This seems to suggest that in engaging with Iser's texts it is important to view them as dynamic structures rather than as a finished theoretical edifice from which individual aspects can be taken at will. Although it might mean stating the obvious, it is worthwhile pointing out in this context that Iser is concerned mainly with literature, with fiction, with the "aesthetic object" and with the relation of these to human beings. Explanation, such a core concept in the social sciences, helps Iser to describe literature *ex negativo*: '[L]iterature is not an explanation of origins; it is a staging of the constant deferment of explanation' (Iser, 1989: 245), and the same goes for fiction, the theme so central to his work: 'The more fiction eludes an ontological definition, the more unmistakably it presents itself in terms of its use. If it is no longer confined to an explanatory function, its impact becomes its most prominent feature' (Iser, 1989: 267).

When organisational scholars simply ignore the rich texture of Iser's work, we encounter some perverse[16] example is Linstead's (2000) use of concepts from Iser's work on games/play in a text (agōn, alea, mimesis, ilinx) in his rhetorical analysis of a letter written to all staff of the *Asia Pacific Institute of Technology* by their President. It is worth quoting Linstead at some length:

> 'In texts, and I am arguing in human organization more generally, of which
> texts are a part and an exemplar, these prototypes combine, merge, and
> dominate each other in different ways. Iser (1993: 259-73) explores in some
> detail the ways in which the various games may combine, and particularly the
> effects of combination on the differences between results-oriented games
> (agon, alea) and process-oriented games (mimicry, ilinx). *For our purposes
> here it is not necessary to present his arguments in detail*, but we can return
> to our consideration of the President's letter to identify some of them in play.
> What dominant game was the President playing in writing what he did? I read
> it as primarily a combination of agon and mimicry [...] The fact that the rules

are not well understood or obvious, and that there is an unvoiced opposition
to which the President's letter is both anticipation and reply, lends the
subversive shadow of ilinx to the piece [...] It is, however, most important for
him to attempt to exclude wherever possible elements of alea (chance) and
ilinx (anarchy) which would undermine his portrayal of a measurable world
in which quality was unequivocal [...]' (Linstead, 2000: 76-77; our emphasis).

Here Linstead ignores Iser's explicitly stated objective that 'play' pertains particularly to
the literary text, that it is precisely what distinguishes the literary text from other text
forms: '[…] embodying different types of interaction between the fictive and the
imaginary [...] independently of their practical functions in the worlds of discourse' (Iser,
1993: 271). Indeed, rhetorical analysis is precisely what Iser wants to get away from, as
Thomas (2000: 25) argues: 'Specifically, Iser's theory challenged the tendency to treat
literature as operating like all other forms of rhetoric, that is as a mode of persuasion […]
Literature in Iser's model is a rhetorical means to question the adequacy of present
constructions of rhetoric.'

Iser's development of a heuristics for human self-interpretation through literature has the
potential to make organizational scholars rethink fundamental concepts (such as, for
example, "explanation", "representation", "fact", "fiction") and the relationships between
them. Yet a direct projection of Iser's theory onto the texts of organization theory would
pose considerable theoretical and practical/methodological difficulties. However *text* is
defined in organization studies (either as in the academic community writing about
organizations, or as text produced in organizations), it will not fall into the realm of
literature or the aesthetic as Iser sees it. Organizational texts are always written for a
particular purpose (this seems to be an institutionally defined requirement), and in order
to be effective they have to deny their fictionality. The text we are dealing with in
organization studies is what is external to the literary text; it is part of what the literary
text is there to reflect on. Literature allows us to cope with the world, to 'gain shape',
and it 'tends to be a kind of institution that undermines all institutionalizations by
exhibiting what both institutionalizing acts and definitions have to exclude in view of the
stability they are meant to provide' (Iser, 1993: 303). Armstrong (2009) encounters

precisely such a practical difficulty in trying to use Iser's theory to question institutional reality. In his 'fictional encounter between Ian McEwan and Wolfgang Iser' he pays particular attention to the *Imaginary* dimension of the triadic relationship between the *Real*, the *Fictive* and the *Imaginary* which is so central to Iser's later work. Armstrong (2009: 189) explores the possibility that a radical imaginary could emerge from reading literary fiction – '[…] fiction of this kind works by inviting the reader to create an imaginary in which their taken-for-granted views of the world are called into question' – which in turn could interrogate institutional rationality. However, he has to acknowledge the limitations of marshalling Iser's theory for the construction of such a critical imaginary since 'Iser's reception theory guarantees nothing about how real readers respond to the literary text'. For Armstrong, Iser's *Imaginary* fails in the critique of institutional rationality, 'not because [it] is conservative in principle, but because it is too open to the possibility of turning out to be so […]'. Perhaps this is not so much a 'failing' on Iser's part (in fairness, Armstrong calls the failing 'generous') than an inevitable consequence of organizational (or political) scholars asking something from literature that it cannot deliver. We have tried to capture the tension between expectations and limitations of literature in the two contrasting epigraphs of our concluding section.

Final reflections

> 'Literature, against which a good many sociologists have […] thought
> necessary to define themselves in order to assert the scientificity of their
> discipline […], is on many points more advanced than social science, and
> contains a whole trove of fundamental problems [...] that sociologists should
> make their own and subject to critical examination instead of ostentatiously
> distancing themselves from forms of expression and thinking that they deem
> to be compromising' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 208).

> '[...] if literature is all that stands between us and suicide, then we might as
> well commit suicide' (Eagleton, 2003: 170).

For any interdisciplinary discussion to be significant, it must stand in a relationship with an entire body of discourse, a collective endeavour already in place. However, in its earliest encounters with literary theory, the field of organization studies has been most interested in what are particular constructs that emerged at a particular moment in time for a particular purpose but which were often mere punctuations in an ongoing dialogue, never meant to be "endpoints" or "frameworks" to be simply imposed like a grid. Of course, a discursive community can assign any meaning it wishes to particular concepts such as *fiction* or *Reader Response Theory* if the community thinks that such a meaning helps in addressing certain practical or theoretical problems. What we take issue with, however, is the ossification of literary concepts and theories, a process by which they become solid bricks in an ever expanding "wall of knowledge" and where the context in which these concepts and theories have lived and continue to evolve is never explored in a serious fashion. Now that the field of organization studies is becoming increasingly interested in literature (cf. Elsbach et al., 1999; De Cock and Land, 2006; Land and Sliwa, 2009) it is important that early texts exploring the potential of literary theory do not stand unchallenged, lest they acquire some kind of canonical status and entice a new generation of researchers to adopt rather dubious practices.

In reading Iser's work it is inspiring to see him grapple with the dissolution and fluidity which is a consequence of his embrace of a post-foundational approach (thus dispensing with the need for ontological grounding of his key concepts), without facile recourse to any "authorities" or intellectual trends. It is somewhat ironic that organizational scholars refer to literary theorists such as Iser in order to establish some "solid ground" and thus artificially import closure from literary theory (as a kind of *deus-ex-machina*). When engaging truly with Iser's thinking, it is very much in his "honest grappling" that the literary theorist acts as a source of inspiration. Fixed frameworks, lists, criteria and other such devices that refer difficult or contested issues to "the authorities" and which have monopolised the strange encounter between organization theory and literary theory have ultimately little to contribute to the improvement of our intellectual practices.

References

Abrams, M. H. (1993) *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 6th edition. n.p.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Armstrong, P. (2009) 'Imagining institutional rationality? A fictional encounter between Ian McEwan and Wolfgang Iser', *Culture and Organization*, 15(2): 185-201.

Atkinson, P. and A. Coffey (1997) 'Analysing Documentary Realities', in D. Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method & Practice*. London: Sage. 45-62.

Barry, D. and M. Elmes (1997) 'Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse', *Academy of Management Review*, 22(2): 429-452.

Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin.

Bourdieu, P. and L.J.D. Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.

Brown, A. D. (2000) 'Making Sense of Inquiry Sensemaking', *Journal of Management Studies*, 37: 45-75.

Culler, J. (1981/2001) *The Pursuit of Signs*. London: Routledge.

Czarniawska, B. (1998) *A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies*. London: Sage.

Czarniawska, B. (1999) *Writing Management: Organization Theory as a Literary Genre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Czarniawska, B. (2009) 'Distant readings: anthropology of organizations through novels', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 22(4): 357-372.

De Cock, C. and C. Land (2006) 'Organization/Literature: Exploring the Seam', *Organization Studies*, 27(4): 517-535.

Deetz, S. (1996) 'The Positioning of the Researcher in Studies of Organisations: De-Hatching Literary Theory', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 5(4): 387-391.

DeVault, M. L. (1990) 'Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(4): 887-921.

Eagleton, T. (1996) *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Eagleton, T. (2003) *Figures of Dissent*. London: Verso.

Easton, G. and L. Araujo (1997) 'Management Research and Literary Criticism', *British Journal of Management*, 8: 99-106.

Elsbach, K. D., R.I. Sutton and D.A. Whetten (1999) 'Perspectives on Developing Management Theory, Circa 1999: Moving from Shrill Monologues to (Relatively) Tame Dialogues', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 8: 627-633.

Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gephart, R. P. (1993) 'The Textual Approach: Risk and Blame in Disaster Sensemaking', *Academy of Management Journal*, 36: 1465-1514.

Golden-Biddle, K. and K. Locke (1993) 'Appealing Work: An Investigation of How Ethnographic Texts Convince', *Organization Science*, 4(4): 595-616.

Hatch, M. J. (1996) 'The Role of the Researcher: An Analysis of Narrative Position in Organization Theory', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 5(4): 359-374.

Hatch, M. J. and D. Yanow (2008) 'Methodology by Metaphor: Ways of Seeing in Painting and Research', *Organization Studies*, 29(1): 23-44.

Iser, W. (1978) *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (1989) *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (1993) *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (2000) *The Range of Interpretation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Iser, W. (2006) *How to Do Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Land, C. and M. Sliwa (2009) 'The novel and organization: introduction from the Editors', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 22(4): 349-356.

Linstead, S. (2000) 'Ashes and Madness: The Play of Negativity and the Poetics of Organization', in S. Linstead and H. Höpfl (eds.) *The Aesthetics of Organization*. London: Sage. 61-92.

Linstead, S. (2003) 'Introduction: Text, organization and identity', in S. Linstead (ed.) *Text/Work: Representing organization and organizing representation*. London: Routledge. 1-12.

Ng, W. and C. De Cock (2002) 'Battle in the Boardroom: A Discursive Perspective', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(1): 23-49.

Nünning, A. (ed.) (2001) *Metzler Lexikon der Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze. Personen. Grundbegriffe***,** 2nd revised and enlarged edition. Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler.

O'Connor, E. S. (1995) 'Paradoxes of Participation: Textual Analysis and Organizational Change', *Organization Studies*, 16(5): 769-803.

Phillips, N. and J.L. Brown (1993) 'Analyzing Communication In And Around Organizations: A Critical Hermeneutic Approach', *Academy of Management Journal*, 36(6): 1547-1576.

Schwab, G. (2000) '"If only I were not obliged to manifest": Iser's aesthetics of negativity', *New Literary History*, 31(1): 73-90.

Thomas, B. (2000) 'Restaging the Reception of Iser's Early Work, or Sides Not Taken in Discussions of Aesthetics', *New Literary History*, 31(1): 13-42.

Tsoukas, H. and M.J. Hatch (2001) 'Complex thinking, complex practice: A narrative approach to organizational complexity', *Human Relations*, 54: 979-1013.

Van Maanen, J. (1998) 'Different Strokes: Qualitative Research in the Administrative Science Quarterly from 1956 to 1996', in J. Van Maanen (ed.) *Qualitative Studies of Organizations*. London: Sage. ix-xxxii.

Weick, K. E. (1999) 'Theory Construction as Disciplined Reflexivity: Tradeoffs in the 90s', *Academy of Management Review*, 24(4): 797-806.

Zapf, H. (1991) *Kurze Geschichte der anglo-amerikanischen Literaturtheorie.* Munich: Fink.

Zima, P. (1999) *The philosophy of modern literary theory*. London: Athlone Press.

---

[1] Given the vitriolic nature of the review (it also included a black cross in font size 24 next to the 'Not Publishable' category) and a steadfast refusal by the referee to engage in any meaningful way with our critique (the comments related mainly to our inability to write proper English) we have to assume the manuscript was sent to one of the authors we critiqued.

[2] New Criticism describes the theoretical approach that dominated literary theory (especially in the USA) from ca. the 1920s to the 1960s. New Criticism was not a homogenous movement, but a similarity between the different directions is the focus on the text itself, without any reference to the historical circumstances of a literary work's creation and reception or to the biography of the author. In this theoretical view the meaning of a literary text can be revealed by solely studying the text itself (Comp. Abrams, 1993: 264ff.; Eagleton, 1996: 38-46).

[3] Also compare Atkinson and Coffey (1997: 46): 'If we wish to understand how such organizations work and how people work in them, then we cannot afford to ignore their various activities as readers and writers.'

[4] The main body of Easton and Araujo's text is based on a reading of Abrams's important but not uncontroversial book from 1953 *The Mirror and the Lamp* (for a critical review see Culler, 2001: Chapter 8).

[5] Later, she proposes a broader concept of *text* that would have been closer to the organisational reality she was looking at: 'My analysis has been severely limited by its focus on language and text. Interviews and surveys would no doubt have illuminated other facets of change, particularly as regards the rhetorical functions of the texts, but this is not my expertise' (O'Connor, 1995: 795).

[6] These are: 'The Narrator Tells the Story as an Objective Observer' (Hatch, 1996: 362f.), 'The Narrator as a Minor Character in the Story' (363f.), 'The Main Character Tells the Story' (364-366), and 'The Omniscient Viewpoint' (366f.).

[7] An obvious example of why author and narrator are not the same is Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* where the narrator is a horse. We admit that in the case of *Tom Jones* the narrative position is less obvious because of the frequent change of narrative perspective. Hatch also contradicts herself somewhat because she later states that '[i]n literature, the narrator is typically accepted as fictional, whereas in social science the narrator is more likely to be confused with the author' (Hatch, 1996: 365).

[8] We note that in a more recent article Hatch leaves literary theory behind and turns to painting for opening up organizational research to new possibilities, aligning Rembrandt and Pollock with 'realists' and 'interpretivists' respectively (Hatch and Yanow, 2008). The authors borrow their title from John Berger's famous book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) to highlight 'the importance of (re)presentation in research' (Hatch and Yanow, 2008: 24) without engaging at all with that book or Berger's broader body of work. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the article in depth, it suffices to say that the critique put forward of the three examples – a colonial approach to the 'other' field, spurious referencing, and a predilection for neat categories – equally applies here.

[9] Reader Response Theory is also referred to as "the Anglo-Saxon variation" of *Rezeptionsästhetik* [reception aesthetics] or *Reception Theory*. (Comp. Nünning, 2001: 549)

[10] Also compare the title of the article: '*Appealing* Work: An Investigation of How Ethnographic Texts Convince' (our emphasis).

[11] In what is probably an oversight, though in this context a curious one, Czarniawska (1999) references Iser's book as '*The Art* [sic] *of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*.' The actual title of Iser's book is *The Act of Reading* [German: *Der Akt des Lesens*].

[12] This passage in its context also occurs verbatim in an earlier book (Czarniawska, 1998: 70).

[13] Compare Index, s.v. "Rorty, Richard" (Czarniawska, 1999: 131).

[14] Indeed, Czarniawska herself seems to highlight a certain tension when she ascribes a difference to the "function" of fiction in literature and organisational life but a similarity to the study of that "functioning": 'The fiction of accounting has a different function than does literary fiction, but their emergence and functioning can be studied in a similar way' (2009:361).

[15] *How to Do Theory* (2006) was his last published book (Iser died in 2007), but it is a sophisticated textbook rather than a research monograph, thus offering no new theoretical contributions.

[16] Unfortunate because elsewhere Linstead is much more careful in his treatment of literature and literary concepts (e.g. Linstead, 2003).