

UNPLUGGED

Fiction as an Instrument of Conceptual Exploration

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'All my novels are constructed around an impossibility: what is impossible to say, impossible to speak of, a blind spot that I will tackle by bringing sensual and narrative knowledge to bear'.

Patrick Chamoiseau¹

¹ Radio interview broadcast on France Culture on 18 August 2017, available at <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-masterclasses/patrick-chamoiseau-la-premiere-phrase-determine-tout-le-reste-quand-elle>.

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Between 2016 and 2018, I composed a fiction on the theme of innovation untitled *The Innovator's Odyssey*. Through the adventures of a keen inventor faced by the bureaucratisation of his world, the story explores themes relating to innovation management in large companies and in society more generally. This turn to fiction was unexpected and unplanned. It imposed itself rather, in the course of my research, as a way of tackling, in Chamoiseau's words, 'what is impossible to say, impossible to speak of'. Of the many different aspects of the experience, it is this more than anything that spurred me on in my exploration of the links between theory and fiction.

Why the turn to fiction?

When I set out to write, I was not planning to write fiction. I was intending to write a conventional academic work based on 3 years of research undertaken with a mathematician friend. My idea was to show how one could formalise the innovation process by means of the method this friend had developed for the case of living systems. This being somewhat abstract, I was hoping to find a way of getting it across by anchoring the presentation in concrete organisational situations, by applying it, for instance, to cases. When I set about writing, however, I found it difficult to find a *form* appropriate to the spirit of the project.

Every attempt to formalise thought – a developing line of reasoning – finds itself confronted by a dilemma: 'If one seeks above all to bring out a certain intellectual coherence, one risks losing sight of the very movement of thought, the course of reasoning. [...] If, on the other hand, one looks at the reasoning in its entirety then one risks getting lost in the byways of discovery'.² The difficulty is doubtless only the more acute when one is dealing with innovation, a field where theory is always in danger of saying too much, and

² (Daval & Guilbaud, 1945, cited in Blanché, 1973).

method perhaps not enough. Having already published the results of our research elsewhere (Béjean & Ehresmann, 2015), what I was looking for now was a form of communication that would itself do justice to the dynamic and indeterminate character of the process of emergence of the new.

A friend who had heard a presentation in which I used a story to get my ideas across suggested that the long short story might offer a way out of the difficulty. To support his case, he urged me to reread Dégot et al.'s *Chroniques Muxiennes* (1982), a series of tales (whose title recalls that of Stendhal's *Italian Chronicles*) that explore scenarios for the introduction of office automation and IT more generally on the basis of the authors' research at the Electricité de France (EDF), the French national electricity utility, in 1979. For them, the use of fiction prompted 'a fundamental re-consideration of the bases and methodologies of forecasting studies on the use of technology in organisations' (Midler, 2010). Already stuck for far too long, I ended up following this original and inspiring path.

What was the effect of this on the work?

Unexpected as it was, this experiment in writing had a significant effect on my work. Intending to present the results of earlier researches, my initial expectation had been that the fictional narrative would help communicate these, make them more easily understood by the reader. But as I progressed with the writing, the story seemed to stray from the logical sequences I wished it to illustrate. Endowed with its own integrity, it seemed to resist my will. As time went on, it called into being new characters whom I had had no intention of introducing. Of these, some supported my argument, while others challenged it. The whole texture of the work was thereby altered. Like some unconventional research community, these figures came to populate my reflections.

To avoid readerly alarm at such seeming irrationality, it may be worth invoking here two better-credentialed characters: Deleuze and Guattari. For them, conceptual exploration always involves the intervention of what they call conceptual characters or personae. Quite distinct from the characters of any philosophical dialogue, 'conceptual personae carry out the movements that describe the author's plane of immanence, and they play a part in the very creation of the author's concepts' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). And they go on to say, speaking of the author, 'I am no longer myself but thought's aptitude for finding itself and spreading across a plane that passes through me at several places. [...] The conceptual persona has nothing to do with abstract personification, symbol or allegory, since it lives, it insists'.

So it was that in gradually making their way through a field of knowledge that they sought no longer not only to communicate but also to intervene in, to reconfigure, my characters departed from a purely didactic and demonstrative logic to develop and embody an argument in process. Exploring and disclosing thought in movement, the story took me beyond what I had been intending to write at the start. It came to articulate concepts and experiences hitherto unknown to me, identifying and formulating radically new problematics and giving form to thought in process. In an echo of the multi-agent approach that I had intended to present, my characters became actors in an investigation that was no longer entirely under my own control.

What prospects for fiction in management research?

What did I learn from the experience? What did it have to say about my practice as a researcher? These are the questions that presented themselves afterward, opening up a new field of reflection. In addition to those few I had initially in mind, I discovered that many other colleagues were also very interested in such matters. Germain and Laifi (2018) were thus able to identify a number of uses of fiction in management research. Fiction, for example, can serve as a mere simulacrum, when researchers confine themselves to elaborating a conventional narrative intended to convey a certain realism or plausibility. But Germain and Laifi's fictions can also serve a more ambitious end, that of 'revealing the unsayable and unseeable'.

For them, 'fictional rationality' (Rancière, 2019) can contribute to our understanding of organisations. The critical aspect of fiction can, thus, 'give voice to the voiceless', disclosing 'what goes on at the margins, in the interstices'. It reveals 'what actually goes on, the indetermination of the course of events' and explores the human possibilities available, projecting 'different possible versions of the social world', from the most conventional to the most alternative, sometimes in performative mode. For the researcher, the writing of fiction allows 'the representation of people's lived experience in all its dimensions' and offers the possibility of 'making the organisation present', embodying it (Germain & Laifi, 2018).

These examples show that fiction can, indeed, contribute to management research. Though I was not aware of it at the time, my own experience corresponds perhaps to one of these usages, recalling, for example, the hermeneutic of invention described by Barrère and Martucelli (2009), in which the novel serves as a 'laboratory' of new concepts; their approach, however, invokes a work already in existence, ready for over-interpretation. In terms of theory, I hope that my effort may prompt others to further develop the generative use of fiction, exploiting the sensual and narrative knowledges it makes

available as a powerful instrument of conceptual exploration. And in terms of practice, I hope the story of Eno Vaytor will inspire front-line innovators and help them confront and perhaps overcome their own impossibilities.

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