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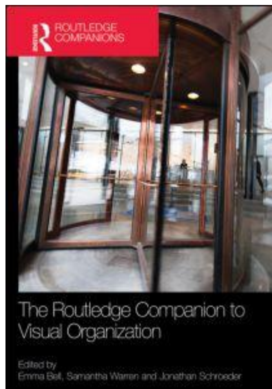

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(Seeing) organizing in popular culture

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24

(Seeing) organizing in popular culture

Discipline and method

Martin Parker

Culture, in its widest anthropological sense, cannot be reduced to the visual.[1] This much seems obvious, since culture also comprises of smell, hearing, taste and touch. Even if we restrict the definition of culture to the consumption and production of goods within the service sector, I can't think of many examples of culture which are one-dimensional in sensory terms. When we visit a white cube art gallery or a music festival, go to the cinema, play a video game or eat a Double Whopper with cheese, we are immersed in a bath of the senses. It might be possible to say that one of those senses is a dominant one – sound in the case of the music festival, for example – but we would find it hard to understand the music festival without also acknowledging what it looked like, smelled like and so on. The mud and the toilets are just as much constitutive of experience as what happens on stage.

To make the point, take the example of a comic book, a predominantly visual medium. The one I am holding now is titled *The Adventures of Unemployed Man* (Origen and Golen 2010). It's a soft-cover graphic novel, satirically echoing the golden age of superhero comic books in its rather grandiloquent tone, art, panel arrangement and lettering. There are even mock full-page adverts for magic rings, crystals and other superhero comics. It could be reproduced visually in this book, or on a screen. However, as any comic book fan will tell you, that is not all that matters here. Comics often have a particular feel to them because of the heavily inked and oversized paper. They *feel* different from magazines, which are usually glossier, newspapers, which are thinner and larger, and books, which are smaller and denser. Comics also often smell like comics, again probably because of the thickness and variety of inks on poor-quality paper. As you turn the page, you can hear the rustle of the paper, higher pitched than you get from a book, and feel the rather unwieldy way that it sits in your hand. With less robust covers than a book, it flops and curls, and means that you sometimes have to spread your fingers to support it, or fold it at the spine so that you can read one page at a time. It can also, if you are careless with your comics, be rolled and slid into a pocket. And this is just the object, because most fans would also tell you about their favourite comic book shops, or the yearly conventions they visit, or their friends who they argue with about the relative merits of *2000AD* stories, the best artist, and the merits or problems with the latest Marvel film adaptation of a classic superhero story.

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Just as cultural forms and processes spill into one another, so do the ways in which they are experienced, so it isn't really possible to write a chapter about cultural representations of organization which only considers the visual. Of course, the reverse is also true too, so I will assume that all the arguments about the neglect of the visual within studies of organizations and more widely are simply accepted. However, and this is important to my argument below, one of the reasons that studies of organizing have tended to have an impoverished sense of the visual is precisely because they were working with highly particularized and containerized senses of what organizations are. No wonder that we see so few examples of visual research in this area when the organization chart was often enough taken to be reflective of power relations and decision-making, or what a manager said to an interviewer was assumed to reflect practice within a workplace. Such one-dimensional assumptions led to one-dimensional methods and, in turn, to one-dimensional representations.

This chapter considers the relationship between disciplinary assumptions and their objects of enquiry in order to try to explain the relevance of *The Adventures of Unemployed Man* for academics interested in organizations. I begin with a history of ideas of culture, which moves us from colonial anthropology to the business school, noting as we go how different meanings of 'culture' are inflected by their disciplinary origins. This is followed by an exploration of the popular culture of organization, of which I think this comic is an example, followed by some thoughts on methods, disciplines and institutions. If we want to understand why the visual has often been a problem for social science research, particularly where organizations are concerned, it is necessary to show how institutions provide what the art theorist John Berger (1972) famously called 'ways of seeing'. The places we look from are not innocent, but shape what we can see, what we can't see, and how we see things at all.

Culture: mass, popular, organizational

Culture, like many words, can mean many things (Williams 1976: 87). In its most general sense, it refers to an anthropological understanding of the way of life of a people, and implicitly suggests some sort of distinctiveness between what different sorts of people do in different places and at different times. In that wide sense, it includes forms of song, dance, myth and so on, but also topics which many commentators might put in other boxes – such as kinship relations, technology, economy and so on. That is to say that the anthropological sense of culture would, in principle, leave nothing out. It represents an attempt to capture a whole way of life without making any particular distinctions between different parts of that life. This is simply because, as with the example of the senses above, the different forms of anthropological culture intermingle. A visual representation of different gods might also tell us something about different lineages, and hence who can marry and inherit. Or a comic book might contain a critique of free market assumptions and the liberal individualism that they imply, but also be sold for $14.99 by a capitalist publishing firm. Wherever we begin, every other aspect of that life is implicated, because the social world does not come with dotted lines that allow us to separate economics, from politics, from culture and so on.

However, it seems to have been easier to maintain this holistic sense of culture when the object of enquiry was 'others'. Anthropology grew out of the colonial encounter which identified 'them' as different from 'us', and perhaps it was easier to see *their* lives as undivided when 'we' viewed them from a distance. Once the social sciences began to emerge in the imperial nations in the second half of the nineteenth century, processes of division and distinction begin to produce diverse fields of enquiry which made a series of increasingly definitive claims about the separation of different elements of human life. The disciplines of economics, psychology,

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politics, sociology and so on were each predicated on the idea that they were investigating distinctive sites or institutions. At the same time, the humanities were increasingly demarcating those aspects of cultural life with which they are concerned – history, literature, music, visual art and so on. While such distinctions were certainly helpful for academic claims to expertise and producing a way of seeing, they also decisively fragmented the possibilities for knowing, producing a wide range of images of humankind.

In the case of the humanities, they also sedimented the idea of an implicit class distinction, which became a way of understanding who has culture and who does not. We can see this in the second common meaning of culture as a label for *particular* and *preferred* cultural forms and practices – opera and not popular song, literature and not dime novels or penny dreadfuls. In general terms, this implies an epistemological distinction between 'art' and the everyday, and, hence, a distinctive set of research sites where such work could be done – museums, galleries, certain theatres and universities themselves. To speak of someone as 'cultured' means that they are knowledgeable about what Matthew Arnold called 'the best that has been thought and said' (Storey 1994: 6). More generally, it also becomes a way of gesturing towards the manners of the upper and middle classes,[2] referring to particular forms of supposedly timeless comportment and attitude. The raucous and ephemeral vulgarities of the people after the Industrial Revolution were hence not culture at all in this second sense, and certainly not worthy of serious study. To put it bluntly, since trivia had nothing timeless to say about the human condition, it could easily be consigned to the dustbin of history as 'mass' culture.

Combining disciplinary division with a cultural politics based on exclusion meant that academic ideas about culture have tended to be fragmented and multiple. Within studies of organizations, for example, the use of the term culture begins to be applied in quite specific ways from the 1980s onwards. Though earlier writers from organizational sociology, occupational psychology and industrial anthropology had referred to organizational 'climate', 'atmosphere' and 'personality', the development of the idea of 'organizational' culture within the growing business school was driven by the claim that culture could be a source of excellence (Parker 2000). In practice, what was being studied was an epistemologically demarcated version of culture, because the interest was largely in the fit between strategy and attitudes, and the accounts were usually those of management and professionals. Yet even the work that continued an older tradition of shop-floor ethnography tended to be shaped by its origins in different ways. The organization tended to be imagined as a container, a time and place where a particular sort of culture happened. Despite Linda Smircich's (1983) often-repeated insistence that organizations don't *have* cultures, they *are* cultures, the tendency was to assume that culture began at nine and ended at five, and could be found within the boundaries of the workplace. The multiple intersections between the symbolic universe of a particular organization and that of a wider culture were hence rarely explored, perhaps because they were assumed not to be relevant for a business school audience. If it was work and organizations that were being studied, the research needed to take place *in* work organizations, and not across, between or outside them.

Such a disciplinary focus should not surprise us, but the late 1960s saw a series of movements in sociology, history and literature that were beginning to undo both the epistemological and institutional divisions that had produced such a complex terrain for a reasonably simple concept.[3] The result was what is now usually called cultural studies, and (to simplify considerably) this was a new interdisciplinary space where an anthropological definition of culture was being applied to the way of life of the people of modern societies. Social historians began to investigate the common people, rather than kings and generals, cultural sociologists began to relax the distinction between culture and structure, which had produced their discipline, and literary critics began to pay attention to chap-books, popular ballads and comics (Storey 1993;

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Lewis 2008). The result was an opening for a different way of seeing culture, one which refused epistemological and disciplinary difference in favour of an engagement with everyday materials, with the celebration of the popular rather than the denigration of the mass. One might have imagined that this would include work, but, in practice, organizations were rarely considered to be of interest in themselves in early cultural studies, more the backdrop to research on shopping, schooling and policing, or the unexamined sites which somehow produced clothes, TV programmes, pop music and so on. In a sense, the focus was what happened outside work, in the 'leisure' time of the weekend and the spaces of the shopping mall, in the places of consumption rather than the places of production (Parker 2006).

And so now we can return to where we began, with the question of how to deal with *The Adventures of Unemployed Man*. The problem has been that this sort of cultural form tends to fall between the gaps. It is a comic, so not of immediate interest to those working in the visual arts or literature because it can't be clearly located within certain epistemological or institutional assumptions. It is clearly 'about' work and organizations, but not produced within or for the business school, or for those working in any particular organization. Indeed, its tone is very hostile to the ideological claims made by the proponents of free markets, a knowledge economy, self-management and so on. In some sense, it could be argued that it is a leisure product, yet its content does not celebrate a particular form of consumption or an escapist life outside work, so it seems not to harmonize with the temper of cultural studies. It seems that this piece of popular culture doesn't fit well into the sorts of boxes that the university provides, which makes it interesting in all sorts of ways.

The popular culture of organization

I will assume that the lack of fit is a problem with the university rather than with this comic. In other words, that the problem is with the way that we classify the world, and not with the world itself. In order to understand this object, to be able to 'see' it as something other than trivia or a category mistake, we need to have a way of placing it, and of applying some sort of method (perhaps visual) to it. In an anthropological sense, it is clearly culture. It also seems fairly obvious that it is a form of popular culture, because it is not epistemologically privileged or associated with particularly elevated institutions. So I'm going to suggest that this represents part of the 'popular culture of organizing' – a genre of cultural representation that comments on work, management and business, but in ways that are often satirical and broadly hostile to authority.

The suggestion here is that the counter-culture can be set against a 'culture *for* organizing', which contains many images of work and management that are broadly positive. Think of the sorts of ideas you find in orthodox textbooks, in the marketing claims made by business schools, business magazines and newspapers, and the shelves full of glossy one-minute manager books. Rather like the utopian dreams of escape offered by musicals, fashion, holidays or betting shops in popular culture, this is mirrored in an elitist set of representations that combine first-class lounges, expensive watches and exclusive credit cards with the idea of being a special person. Certain people are part of the star system within this arena – management consultants with international tours delivered to packed conference rooms in expensive hotels, 'outlaw' entrepreneurs who can afford private jets, business school professors who can charge extraordinary fees for their wisdom. Embedding these images are other more mundane ones – well-dressed people looking at laptops, workplaces with water coolers and dress-down Fridays, and apartments offering lifestyle living in the heart of the city. This is all part of a cultural genre in which organizations, management and work are regarded as central to the reproduction of what is

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good, and the smile of an executive gazing out of an aeroplane window as a (female) member of the aircrew passes by smiling tells us what our dreams should be.

However, as is obvious, this culture for organizing is hugely contested. *The Adventures of Unemployed Man* is just one example here. It tells the story of a smug middle-aged white superhero – 'Ultimatum' – who passes through the city at night with messages of self-help for the poor and deviant. However, after being fired from a company he thought he owned and realizing that he can't get another job, he gradually comes to realize that the problem is the inequalities of capitalism, and not the indolence of the poor. Fighting the forces of the 'Invisible Hand' and 'The Free Marketeers', he becomes 'Unemployed Man' and defeats evil through collective organization. Just about everything in this comic contests the corporation, neoliberalism, consumer credit and the individualism which underpins pro-managerialism utopianism. Yet I do not believe that this is an unusual or anomalous example. Indeed, I would argue that the counter-culture of organizing is actually just as important and widespread as that which it opposes, and perhaps even more so. The interesting question is just why these cultural artefacts and practices tend not to be visible, but more on that in a moment.

Just to take some examples – in films as diverse as *Brazil* (1985), *What Women Want* (2000), *Monsters Inc.* (2001) and *Fun with Dick and Jane* (2005), we have plots that are organized around the idea that the work organization is the problem.[4] In popular film, most organizations are managed by bureaucrats, careerists or criminals, and freedom can only be found by telling the boss what you really think and then walking out, or pushing him/her out of the window of the skyscraper. In much storytelling, this is now no more than the deployment of a very common stereotype. If you want a bad guy, then make him a company executive (Bell 2008: 65 *passim*). So, when *The Muppets* film was being made in 2012, the plot revolved around an evil oil baron called Tex Richman. Even in science fiction movies, which we might imagine to be most divorced from such grubby questions of power and wealth, many now classic films have shadowy evil corporations as the ultimate source of the problem that needs to be overcome – The Tyrell Corporation in *Bladerunner*, Omnicorp in *Robocop*, Skynet in *Terminator* and The Weyland-Yutani Corporation in the *Alien* films. Our heroes are pirates and outlaws who fight against organizations (Parker 2012), and films about work are explorations of the meaninglessness of routine, boredom and humiliation – *Clerks* (1994), *Office Space* (1999), *Waydowntown* (2000), *I Really Hate My Job* (2007), *Horrible Bosses* (2011) and many others.

I think we can add to this list of films a whole series of less publicized ways in which the same generalized scepticism is routinely deployed in endless acts of production and consumption. For example, there is something fascinating about a 'Fuck Work' badge. I have one, and think of it as an impossible object (or, at least, a hypocritical one) since it, in some sense, attempts to deny the very labour that went into its production. Someone imagined it, and then other people designed it and chose a colour and typeface that someone else had designed, marketed it, optimized the production schedule, pressed the button that made the machines run, packed it, designed a website, distributed it, sold it and collected the profit, or even the interest from their investment. While the 'Fuck Work' example is rather extreme, a lot of money is clearly made through selling other examples of the counter-culture of organization. C. Northcote Parkinson's *Parkinson's Law* (1958) was an early example of a book-length view of organizations as inane bureaucracies populated by pompous and stupid men in suits. More recent examples are *Bureaucrats: How to Annoy Them* (Fishall 1981); *The Official Rules of Work* (Dickson 1996); the *Bluffer's Guide to Management* (Courtis 2000); *The Little Book of Management Bollocks* (Beaton 2001); *The Little Book of Office Bollocks* (Gelfer 2002); and *Bullshit Bingo* (Edmonds 2005). Found in a similar place in the book or gift shop might be *Mr Mean's Guide to Management* (Hargreaves 2000); *The Tiny Book of Boss Jokes* (Philips 2002); or *250*

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Dumb Dares for the Workplace, which is 'guaranteed to keep the office entertained'. *The Office Kama Sutra* (Balmain 2001) contains instructions for the 'dance of a thousand sticky notes' and suggests many ways in which offices can become sites of libidinous excess. Rather deliciously, it also has a reversible book jacket that will allow you to pretend that you are actually reading a book called *Getting What you Want at Work: Ten Steps from Fantasy to Reality*. Or you might choose 'Voodoo Lou's Office Voodoo Kit' containing a corporate doll (with male and female sides), pins and 'Executive Spellbook'. The book explains what is wrong with bosses (playing golf, eating big lunches, driving a Lexus), their assistants, the computer nerd and so on. It then proposes various voodoo remedies that will deal with them, and provide the owner with 'your ticket to the corporate high life'. The same is probably not true of the 'Office Profanity Kit', containing a mini talking punchbag which swears at you when you hit it, and three stamps with the mottos – 'This is F**CKING URGENT'; 'Complete and Utter BULLSHIT'; and 'I haven't got time to read this CRAP'.

Television is another place to find examples of similar sentiments, such as the 2004–2005 US reality TV show *I Hate My Job*. A similar show was aired the year before in the UK – *Office Monkey*. Each episode was a TV version of giving the boss the finger.

> Offices are dull dreary places where nothing ever happens. That's why we bribed two members of offices around the country to disrupt their work places in the funniest ways possible. The winner gets a holiday, and the right to call themselves: Office Monkey.
>
> *(http://www.princess.uk.com/programmes/individual/recent/office.htm#)*[5]

The squirming embarrassment that accompanied victory was painful to watch, but tapped into some deeply rooted assumptions about what work is, and what work does to people. Office humour is generally spiteful, a form of vengeance that punishes hypocrisy and pomposity. This has been exploited by many British situation comedies in their portrayal of figures of authority.[6] *On The Buses* (1969–1973), *Are You Being Served?* (1972–1983), and the Reginald Perrin shows (1976–1979) all contained various supervisory or management characters whose vacuous vanity is regularly exposed (Hancock 2008). Often, these dramas were also post-war satires of social class in an era of accelerated social mobility, particularly of the 'jobsworth' who is acting up in terms of status and authority. So, Captain Mainwaring, the bank manager in *Dad's Army* (1968–1977) or the leisure centre manager Gordon Brittas in *The Brittas Empire* (1991–1997) are both claiming airs and graces that they clearly do not possess. Nowhere was this better satirized recently than in the mock-reality TV show *The Office*, which ran for two series on the BBC between 2001 and 2003, and then was remade for US TV in 2005 with eight series made at the time of writing. The US show, featuring the Dunder Mifflin company, has led to a video game, board game, nodding models of the characters, T-shirts, fake Dunder Mifflin websites and parodies of motivational posters.

The other iconic anti-work satire of the last few decades has been the Dilbert cartoons by Scott Adams. Co-opted by an entire generation of management academics and trainers, Adams' syndicated strip explores the stupidities of office life through the eyes of a naive junior (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999: 116–118). Many episodes of *The Simpsons* picked up on similar themes concerning Homer's work at Mr Burns' power plant and the characteristics of the various professionals who work in Springfield (Rhodes 2001; Ellis 2008). These ideas were prefigured in Matt Groening's 1980s cartoons such as the *Work is Hell* collection (2004). Senior managers read articles titled 'How to Make the Veins in your Forehead Throb Alarmingly' in a magazine called 'Lonely Tyrant'. An even more surreal portrayal of work is David Rees' *My New Filing Technique is Unstoppable* (2004), which contains assorted employees abusing each other about

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their filing systems, computers that insult you in the most profane fashion, and a character called Dr Niles Fanderbiles from the Quality Perfection Department who delivers self-righteous homilies in a Chinese accent. These satirical portrayals of work can also be found in plenty of underground comics and zines, such as the sad quietness of Stephen Knowles' *Five Days Out of Seven* (2004). Celebrations of sabotage and slacking, and descriptions of alienation and boss hatred are a powerful theme, as Stephen Duncombe catalogues (1997: 79 *passim*). Less ribald, but just as powerfully, Matanle *et al.* (2008) have also shown how Japanese salaryman manga comics can represent popular challenges to management authority.

Given its easy access at most workplaces and relative anonymity, it is hardly surprising that the Internet has become a site for the popular culture of organizing, as well as many ways to practically avoid working. The circulation of various anti-management spam mails is now a routine part of office life. Surfing during work time is a problem for organizations in itself, and various snooping technologies have been developed to prevent it, just as other counter-technologies have been developed to allow rapid movement between illicit web trivia and 'real' work on the computer. After all, if you were playing 'Whack Your Boss', you would almost certainly not want your superiors to know. This is a downloadable game that lets you kill your boss by using common office equipment.

> So one can enjoy the numerous ways of whacking your boss. You can smash his head to the wall repeatedly, you can squish his egg head in the drawers of your office table. There are actually twenty different types of whacking your boss.
>
> *(http://whackyourboss.info/)*[7]

Bored with watching the blood splatter, you might go and have a look at websites and blogs like i-resign.com, worktotallysucks.com, and mybossisanidiot.com. The last allows you to send a letter from the site to your boss, anonymously of course, and helpfully provides templates and examples of other people's letters. There are some particularly nice examples on the site workrant.com, which encourages obscene venting of various kinds. This, for example, from 'Killy Killkill', in IT and based in the UK.

> Dear Manager
> A quick question – HOW THE FUCK CAN YOU BE SO FUCKING INCOMPETENT WITHOUT ACTUALLY DYING OF IT??? And one comments, which needs to be branded across your stupid fucking face – backwards, so even a fucking mong like you can read it in the mirror – NO YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND MY FRUSTRATION BECAUSE EVERY SINGLE FUCKING FRUSTRATION I HAVE IS ENTIRELY DUE TO YOU. …
> I feel better for that, thank you.

All these examples work so well precisely because the popular culture of organization is embedded into so many assumptions about what work is and what it is not. We don't need to employ a huge amount of interpretive labour to make sense of them, or to explore their assumptions. For example, an advert for cheap flights suggested that you could 'Tell the boss to stick it … where the sun don't shine' because holidays are articulated as a way of escaping from work. A promotion for Christmas parties is called 'P45' (the UK tax form you get when leaving, or being sacked from, work), 'because you never liked your boss anyway'. Or even the advertising for Kit Kat chocolate bars ('Have a break. Have a Kit Kat'), because even having a break from work is part of the routine of work itself. Almost any leisure-related product can make a useful

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reference to the repressive structure of the working week, such as the restaurant chain 'TGI Friday' (Thank God It's …), the TV show *TFI Friday*, or the hundred and one pop songs that have Friday on their mind, and are waiting for the weekend when we can dance, party, escape or be together with the one we love (Rhodes 2007).

This could never be anything like an exhaustive list, but it has indicated something about the variety and scale of the popular culture of organizing. This in itself underscores the ways in which certain disciplinary, institutional and epistemological distinctions are quite capable of making certain matters almost invisible, even when they are as common and noisy as the things I have collected here. Or, if they are seen at all, they can be dismissed as 'not belonging here' – not art, not business, not politics, not leisure. This metaphor of seeing is useful in another way too, because it presses us to think about questions of method.

Methods, and the visual

As is becoming clear, as well as falling between various different disciplinary divisions, the popular culture of organizing is methodologically problematic too. This is another way of understanding why it doesn't fit well within classifications, because very often what we understand to be appropriate as a method is determined by the definition of the object in the first place. So those who study texts, in the narrow sense of written words, have developed a body of literary theory which explores the ways in which those texts can be approached and explicated (Eagleton 2008, for example). Those who study visual art, or dance, or sculpture, or architecture have similarly developed ways of understanding what it means to work with the visual elements of their objects of enquiry. The social sciences, on the other hand, have tended to work with ideas of what 'accounts' – interviews, questionnaires, ethnographies and so on – can reveal about the relationship between beliefs and behaviours. As this volume illustrates, though these accounts may involve the production of visual data – graphs, kinship diagrams, photographs, NVivo diagrams of relationships, nodes and attributes – these are not usually taken to be visual *per se*, but rather the indicators of something else. That is to say, the visual tends to be thought of as useful insofar as it can tell us about some 'deeper' layer of explanation, or be used to triangulate a particular account.

In general, then, different disciplines come with deeply embedded assumptions about what 'data' looks like, what its epistemological status is, and what sorts of methods are legitimate to apply to it. Of course, these might themselves be the subject of much contest within the discipline – such as the dull and longstanding comparison between quantitative and qualitative work – but even then there is usually still some agreement about the 'object', even if there is disagreement about its nature. The popular culture of organization is clearly not amenable to such partitioning. Assuming that it is accepted that I was presenting a more or less coherent body of examples in the previous section – and it might not be – then it is obvious that this phenomenon presents itself in a wide variety of ways. Certainly, it is visual, in the examples of comic books, Internet pages and TV cartoons, but sometimes it is not visual at all, in the examples of popular song and radio programmes. Sometimes it is material and tactile, in a book, a badge or office toy, and sometimes it is virtual, as spam, a TV show or a video game. Most often, it is a form of culture that simply refuses being reduced to one category – just as films are concerned with sight and sound, so do they produce merchandising that is pirated as materials in cheap markets in cities across the world, and parodies which rapidly go virtual and viral.

Just as importantly, the popular culture of organizing is found in different sites – on the noticeboards of offices and sellotaped to walls in factories, or in bookshops, car boot sales, cinemas and homes. There isn't a definitive place you could go to in order to find this cultural

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form, and neither can you say much reliably about who produces it. It might be on the back of a truck, a handmade sign that says 'Mr Friday Night'. It might be a cultural product manufactured by the culture industries – Fox Broadcasting Company (a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News International Corporation) makes *The Simpsons* and the US version of *The Office* is made by Universal TV, part of the NBC TV network. Ironically, these television shows which endlessly parody the big company are financed and produced by big companies. On the other hand, the spam emails and endlessly photocopied satirical notices have no clear source, but we can probably safely say they don't come from the boss. Some products, such as the 'Friday on my Mind'-type pop song, might originate with alienated office boys in garage bands, but then are reproduced and distributed by multinational corporations. As I noted before, an anthropological understanding of culture messes up the boundaries between economics, sociology, politics and so on. It also confuses the methodological distinctions that are embedded in different disciplines.

Insofar as these matters have been treated as worthy of note within cultural studies itself, I think the tendency has been to take on a broadly literary theory method and say that they can all be treated as 'texts'. This visual but rather typographic metaphor can certainly be useful because it stresses the work of 'reading', which inevitably goes into any account of cultural practices and products (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hall 1980). Parts of cultural studies (particularly those influenced by literary and social theory) develop this into broadly semiotic approaches to meaning, in which words, images, sounds and so on can be treated as elements of a sign system. Since all forms of culture putatively have meaning, the task is to produce convincing 'readings' that combine evidence with sophistication and verve (Barthes 1972). Other parts of cultural studies (often the more sociologically inclined work) tend to look at behaviours in a broadly ethnographic fashion, documenting and interpreting what happens in local contexts (Willis 1977), or concentrating on 'reader response' audience studies of particular cultural texts (Morley 1980; Ang 1985).

It seems to me that any attempt to study the popular culture of organization must involve the same sort of pluralism in both method and analysis. If we take the English cultural studies classic *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) as an example, we can see a set of approaches to the study of youth cultures that are very eclectic indeed. After some theoretically dense positioning essays, there is a section (titled 'ethnography') that presents historically informed readings of the dress and attitudes of Teds, Mods and Rastas, a literary and ethnographic account of the Skins, and ethnographies of what it means to hang around on the street doing nothing, and of Hippy drug-taking. There is also a typology of communes, and theoretically informed reading of black music, and of the 'mugging' panic. These essays are followed by others on style, class and generation, girls, marginality, politics and methods. Many of these essays are illustrated by full-page black and white photos of various youth cultures in full dress, as well as various diagrams with arrows and rectangles, and even boxes with mock writing from fieldnotes.

It is a messy book. It uses a wide variety of techniques for documenting and warranting its claims, evidence which ranges from song lyrics to participant observation, as well as very different writing styles by the 25 authors involved. Interestingly, much about the text is concerned with the visual (the 'look' of clothes and so on) and is presented in a visual way. The text is largely set in a courier typeface which echoes the manually typed working paper series from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and which forms most of the content of the book. It looks urgent, rather rough and unpolished, with connotations of authentic unmediated experience. The photographs themselves are largely illustrative, and not analysed in any detail, but the very fact that there are grainy black and white images of kids

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hanging around looking cool provides the book with a dimension that the usual academic text lacks. In an anthropological sense, this book is culture too of course – material culture, visual culture – a culture which reflexively comments on its own epistemological preferences.

So there are certainly openings in cultural studies for a consideration of popular culture as visual but not much interest in work organizations as sites or topics for popular culture. There are also plenty of examples of the popular culture of organization, but little interest in them as a legitimate topic for people who work in business schools. The question that remains concerns a way of seeing, and consequently the sort of methods and analysis that might be appropriate to explore matters that have fallen into the shadows of institutions and disciplines.

Against method

The most obvious objection to what I have suggested here is to say that the collection of materials and practices that I have chosen to call the 'popular culture of organizing' is not a coherent one. In other words, like Borges' famous list from Foucault's *Order of Things* (1989: xvi), it is not a set of things that makes any sense to collect together. It might be said that it would be better to segment the field I have produced and send the different classes of things back to the boxes where they belong. Texts go to literature, songs to music, pictures to visual art and so on. In this way, the problems go away and the disciplines are restored as *tabula*, which allow 'thought to operate on the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and differences' (ibid.: xix). Foucault's consistent concern in his book is how things come to be ordered, and what principles are used to produce different sorts of knowledge to speak about human beings and other materials. This is both a question of deciding when things belong together and when they belong apart, and also what sorts of methods can and should be used on the different categories thereby produced.

For a structural anthropologist like Mary Douglas, these are matters that also reflect the existence and structure of various sorts of institutions. Universities, galleries, newspapers, publishers and so on are all examples of *How Institutions Think* (1987). The hierarchies, departments and processes that are embedded in organizing and organizations encourage us to think in ways that follow those established channels, and also to observe which sort of things belong in different sorts of places. Douglas, of course, has also written about mess as 'matter out of place' (1966), her point being that there is no 'mess' unless we have already decided on a preferred order. The world as it presents itself to us is not disordered, it just *is*, but we begin to perceive it as disordered as soon as we insist on fitting it into the boxes that we provide. John Law plays on similar themes in *After Method* (2004), which begins with an attempt to describe a complex visual illustration. If the world is multiple, fluid, elusive and hybrid, he says, then we need messy imaginative methods to cope with the messy pictures we face. In the social sciences, method and analysis must, to some extent, be mimetic of the conditions that it seeks to reveal, and not always assuming that order lies beneath the surface. It simply isn't possible to say what these methods or forms of analysis should look like, because that would already be to close down the possibility of producing something interesting by looking somewhere unusual. In that sense, any method should be treated with suspicion.

It seems to me that the question of the 'popular culture of organization', within a book that seeks to explore the idea that 'the visual' is a neglected and useful method for studying organization, presents this classification problem in a complex and nested way. The very idea of popular culture is a troubling one to begin with, since it originates as a residual category from that which is not 'high' culture. If 'mass' culture was denigrated, then popular culture is

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celebrated precisely because it questions the epistemology and politics that make opera worth more than *The X Factor*, and sometimes questions the very institutions that produce elite culture. However, it would be easy enough to say that 'popular' here means numerical popularity, and that is going to be a problem. *Five Days Out of Seven* was self-published, and probably printed in a very limited run. Compared to, for example, the attendance at a major city art gallery, Knowles' comic is very selective in its appeal. Deciding what is popular culture is itself then a problem, particularly with regard to a contrast with the 'culture for organizing', which, it could be argued, is a form of popular culture too in numerical terms, since it is not always elite in its appeal (ten Bos 2000). Neither can we make a clear distinction in terms of some sort of ideological commitment, simply because there are plenty of examples of 'high' culture that articulate a critique of industrial societies and modern organizations – Blake, Ruskin, Dickens, Morris, Kafka and so on (Parker 2005).

Yet, even if a stable object called 'popular culture' could be produced, it is by no means obvious why any particular method would be more appropriate than others for studying it. Popular culture is certainly partly a visual medium, and studying it will be impoverished if it neglects this aspect, but it is by no means exclusively visual and indeed is in some ways less visual than certain other cultural categories – such as white cube art, sculpture or ballet. The key point is that an anthropological definition of culture doesn't exclude anything in principle, which is both generous in its ambition and impossible to achieve in practice. The result is unlikely to be tidy and, hence, as Law suggests and *Resistance Through Rituals* demonstrates, a range of messy methods are most likely to be able to cope with a messy world. This degree of imprecision might be unsatisfying to those who prefer order and organization, but is less likely to ignore elements that don't fit into categories that have already been established by particular epistemologies, institutions and methods. In *The Adventures of Unemployed Man*, there is a mock advert for 'Blind-o-Vision' goggles, which 'will allow you to block out negative sights and get on with what's most important'. Disciplines make those decisions for us too, because different ways of seeing produce different objects. They fit them into the shape of the institutions we work in, and encourage the use of certain methods over others.

The organizational shaping of thought, and hence of what is made visible and invisible, is inevitable. We cannot easily do away with institutions, and, even if we don't like the ones we have, it is likely that we will replace them with others that shape how we think and see. So there is no solution to the relationship between location and vision, but simply the reminder that we are always in a location, looking from somewhere and hence never able to see everything. But, that being admitted, it doesn't stop us from asking just how 'Fuck Work' badges might be interesting for people who work in business schools, or why visual methods will always be needed, and at the same time never enough, to understand *The Adventures of Unemployed Man*.

Notes

1 Thanks to Emma Bell for her helpful comments on this chapter.
2 Not just class, though this does seem to have been the most important organizing concept, but also gender, race and ethnicity.
3 I'm not sure that culture is a particularly complex concept. Rather, its wide application results in its being a word with many different antonyms, prefixes and suffixes, which results in its being a family of inflected terms rather than a single word.
4 This section is adapted from Chapter 8 in Parker 2012.
5 This site was accessed some time in 2004, but seems to have disappeared, which is an interesting comment on artefacts and method itself.

6 Apologies for the ethnocentricity of the following examples. Popular culture of the TV variety is rarely genuinely global.

7 These websites were accessed in November 2011.

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