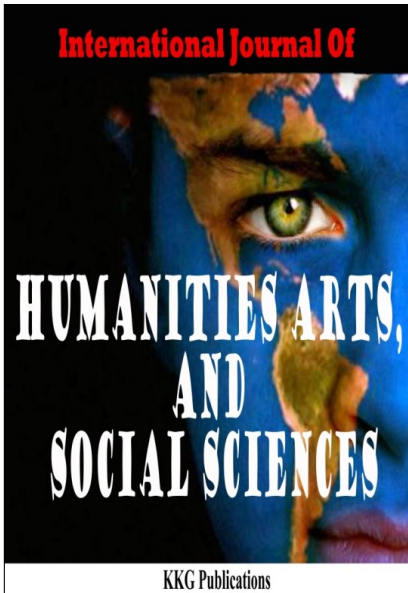


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THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION OF DECISION MAKING: A CASE STUDY OF A GERMAN SOFTWARE COMPANY

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Abstract. Arts-based methods conceptualized as generating different kind of knowledge, which allows understand by feeling, enhance intuition and trigger inspiration. In this paper, an in depth study of a strategy process based drawings is presented, that initiated profound discussions, an open atmosphere and resulted in fresh insights and new perspectives. Based on the empirical data it is shown, that the paintings themselves became an important structural factor influencing the interaction system of the strategy meeting in a way that made these positive results appear. The findings show how knowing aesthetically gives access to a rich experience, and, therefore, complements cognitive knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Making art and managing a company have, for a long time, been considered as different if not to say antagonistic spheres of action (Adorno, 1973). The creative industry was always the exception where the special challenge for management consisted of merging creative chaos on one side and rational planning on the other side. The idea of incompatible ways of thought and action in management and arts is beginning to crumble as global economy changes.

Today's global economic system is characterized by high complexity and dynamics, making long-term planning a risk. The only certainty that we know about the future is that it will be uncertain, a situation that makes managers face completely new challenges.

Peters and Waterman (2006) therefore argue for the need of improvisation and experimentation rather than long-term planning horizons. Qualities such as flexibility, courage, and openness, as well as the ability to think creatively are becoming more and more important in management, a situation that has changed the relationship of arts and management as managers seek to learn from artists how to improvise, how to use their intuition, and how creativity is generated (Adler, 2006).

Consultants and trainers have reacted to this requirement offering a wide range of arts-based methods that aim at the transfer of skills, providing experiences of creativity and improvisation up to techniques that are claimed to provide a deep form of reflection (for an overview, see Linstead, 2000; Springborg,

2012; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Especially in strategic processes, visual methods have become a creative instrument that is claimed to offer fresh insights and is stimulating reflection. Usually the ideas are visualized by a professional painter or illustrator and the discussion of ideas evolves on the basis of these pictures. The method is known as Strategic Visualization (Hausmann, 2015) or Strategic Visioning (Ronis, 2007). It is far more than a communication tool. It is more than communication via pictures. It is a tool that is claimed to lead into a different way of working and thinking. Users state that to see their ideas broadens the perspective as it shows problems in context. It is thinking big along a big picture using imagination and intuition, and pretends people from simplifying difficult and complex challenges and running the risk of ending up with easy, narrow solutions. Similarly, LEGO bricks can be used by managers in order to build 3-dimensional representations of their organizational strategy, which leads to new insights and different ways of discussing the themes (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Burgi, Victor, & Lentz, 2004; Burgi, Jacobs, & Roos, 2005; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Oliver & Roos, 2007; Roos, Victor, & Statler, 2004).

In this article, I present an in-depth study of a visualized strategy meeting in a German software company that also showed the benefits of a broad, open, very lively, consensus-oriented, and smoothly flowing discussion that is mentioned like that in previous studies. Taylor and Ladkin (2009) criticize that most

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accounts stay descriptive instead of analyzing the underlying mechanisms that make these results work. I hope that this paper will accomplish a little bit of that great intention as my purpose is to dive into the structure of why communication, on the basis of pictures, works differently and how it differs exactly from communication by words. Questions that I seek to shed light on are why the work with drawings is perceived as easy, more consent-oriented, smooth, more down at the real task, and why these- actually also simplifying-illustrations succeed in contributing to a rich and complex picture of the matter in question. After reviewing the relevant literature of the field (1), the research model as a case study is introduced and described (2), followed by the data analysis (3) and the conclusion (4).

LITERATURE REVIEW

To build a strategic process around a visualization tool like paintings, pictures or assemblages of objects like LEGO bricks has nothing to do with illustrating an already existing strategy. While a power point presentation is usually used as a medium to explain a pre-existing idea by the means of text, pictures, and diagrams, Strategic Visioning is about finding new ideas. It is a tool for getting into a discussion about a strategy and to find out what is needed to be done. In short, it is about creating new knowledge. The use of arts-based methods for knowledge creation in a strategic process is neither a common thought nor a common method, as art is usually associated with creativity and inspiration and, therefore, applications in the field of innovation seem to be somewhat closer. It is a still new field of Organizational Aesthetics that uncovers the universal relevance of aesthetics accompanying any activity of life.

Organizational Aesthetics has moved beyond studying the relevance of the aesthetics in organizations in terms of an instrumental use as brand design for the embellishment of the offices as a means to enchant clients and customers at a subtle level in advertising or as a symbolic language used for the creation of a corporate identity.

Instead, what organizational aesthetics is interested in is a thorough understanding of the all-encompassing aesthetical dimension of all aspects of organizational life and practice. That new approach goes back to several works that Antonio Strati published in the 90s (Strati, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2000). He argues that a description of social action in terms of international rational choices leaves out other motives for action that might be based on irrationality, myths, impulsiveness, empathy, intuition, tradition or even aesthetics (Strati, 1999, p. 55). If we want to understand action, it is not enough to build idealistic abstract models, but really try to understand how people view their world subjectively. He pleads for a shift in research back to the fullness of what makes up a subjective experience and

argues for an “empathic understanding of the organization” (Strati, 1999, p. 55).

The aesthetics are understood much broader than art. The word “aesthetic” goes back to the Greek word “aisthesis” which means sensual perception via our five bodily senses. The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1750-2008) argued that there is a specific aesthetic knowledge beside and complementary to intellectual analytical knowledge, as we comprehend the world by experiencing it sensually. It is the bodily sensed feeling of what there is, an embodied sensemaking that Weick (1995) in many of his articles describes as intuition and imagination that can be sensed by heedfulness, which already comprises a category of being sensitive (Weick, 1995).

It is this aesthetic layer of a rich experience that has almost vanished in the modern business world. Managers learn about the situation of their company by abstract data. They see diagrams, chains of numbers, spreadsheets etc. With those abstract data, managers run the risk to narrow their views and they risk that, as Morgan (1998) puts it, “the richness and complexity of organizational life are passing them by”. The call for more imaginative strategies leads to openness for methods that use imagination like metaphors (Roos & Victor, 1999). Metaphors symbolically outline a path for the organization, highlighting certain aspects, and enhance sense-making (Morgan, 1998; Tsoukas, 1991). With the metaphor of an organization as a network, the different units of an organization appear as sovereign partners, while with the metaphor of a machine, dependencies and controllability are highlighted. Even though such images are more imaginative, they often prevail for a long time like Kuhn and Hawkins (1963) concept of a paradigm. Steinmann and Schreyogg (2005) criticize that metaphors often would neither resemble the reality nor depict a real target, but rather highlight a positive image that makes it easier to identify with the organization.

In contrast to metaphors, building a strategy manually with Lego bricks or drawing it on paper is much more concrete. Representations take on a material visualized form that allows thinking by hand. It might, therefore, be a way to bring thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) back into strategy debates that are dominated by thin descriptions like numbers, diagrams, etc.

Researchers state that these workshops usually start out with modeling the actual situation of the organization in context of its environment and while doing that, they co-construct a shared view of the present situation (Burgi et al., 2005). Participants not only discover a lot of differences in their perception of the situation; they also become aware of important aspects they had overlooked (Roos et al., 2004). Researchers report that they found “sensitivities to surface” (Oliver & Roos, 2007) and repressed material to be expressed (Barry, 1994).

All accounts consistently report that the workshops are accompanied by an intense atmosphere which is characterized by a high level of energy and emotional involvement accompanied by laughter and apparently fun (Oliver & Roos, 2007; Burgi et al., 2005). It might be due to that atmosphere that these accounts also observe “an astonishing openness and frankness during the discussions about even very sensitive issues”. Even very radical ideas were said that no one had dared to explore, as it seemed too radical (Roos et al., 2004).

As most accounts stay descriptive, there are only few theoretical explanations for these stunning findings. In particular Burgi et al. (2005) attribute the creation of new knowledge to “hand-mind interaction”. On the basis of strands of psychological literature, they presume “that the act of manipulating material was mentally stimulating” (Burgi et al., 2005) and they show how the co-construction of concrete, material representations led to new knowledge. The open atmosphere that allowed discussing even disparate and difficult subjects is attributed by Roos et al. (2004) to the framing of the workshops as playful, which they call “serious play” as actually the intention is not to play but a serious matter as strategy building. The concept of play as an explanation for the constructive-minded atmosphere was taken up by many researchers (Schulz, Geithner, Woelfel, & Krzywinski, 2015; Oliver & Roos, 2007; Wengel, McIntosh, & Cockburn-Wooten, 2016). But is it plausible that quarrels and the subtle micro politics on power stab in the back as some activity is taking place in a playful manner. Although it does make sense that the materiality and concreteness, the visibility, and maybe even the three-dimensionality are the decisive factors for the outcome observed, the workshops themselves are analysed as if there was no organization in the background. The whole subject of daily micro politics is left out of the analysis as if the workshops would be all there is in organizations. But how does the fact that members are players in a larger game competing for jobs, for reputation, better positions etc. influence meetings like a strategy meeting, and what influence has the use of material models of a strategy such as building a three-dimensional representation in bricks with clay or making drawings on the way discussions in meetings proceed? As I will show with the case study presented in this paper, the materiality of the objects created becomes a reality of itself influencing discussions at a structural level.

RESEARCH MODEL: AN IN DEPTH CASE STUDY

As it was projected to take a close look into a strategy process led by creative arts-based tools, we decided to conduct an in depth case study. In the context of a larger research project, a number of arts-based, creative activities in different German companies were studied and one company tried a visual creative

method for their strategy meeting, which gave us the opportunity to watch and analyze that strategy meeting.

The meeting took place in 2016 in a German software company. The meeting was observed and additionally it was fully videotaped and photos were taken. Right after the meeting guided interviews conducted with some participants and about four weeks after the workshop more participant were interviewed in order to find out, how the meeting was valued from a more distant perspective. For recollecting purpose, the meeting and especially the associated feelings and ideas photo elicited interviews (Harper, 1984, 2002; Manger, 2016) were conducted. For the analysis, the interviews were fully transcribed while the videotape was only partially transcribed. In addition to that, I was present at the strategy days a short time after the meeting, where the results of the meeting were communicated to the members of the organization.

The focal point of the analysis was to carve out differences between the observed strategy meeting and the usual meetings, that were conducted along texts or maybe by power point presentations. That difference was asked about in particular in the guided interviews. The theory of interaction systems of Goffman (1967) and also ideas of Weick (1995) served as the main theoretical frames for the interpretation of the data, which was undertaken in the manner of grounded theory (Barney & Glaser, 1992).

The Case Study: A Short Description

Before presenting the data analysis, I will describe the company and the procedure of the analysed meeting as the understanding of the case itself is a key to understanding the analysis.

The Company

The company is a German software company founded in 1999 as a start-up company by two people. Software applications for the automotive industry, telecommunication companies, as well as apps and applications for other customers are programmed. In recent years, the company has grown to 200 employees. The workforce is young, predominantly masculine, dynamic, the loose, chummy startup flair is still to be felt, and it is actively tried to integrate that into the growing company’s culture. There are many activities done together after work: There is an orchestra, different groups meet after work for sporting activities, etc. During every summer, an annual festival is organized for the whole workforce and their families that often include creative activities. Team development is a substantive part of the training program for each of the workstations and artful activities have been undertaken already in this context. Summing up, it can be said that creativity is a lived part of the companies’ corporate culture. Still, conducting a strategic meeting with drawings was

new and experimental for this company.

The Strategy Meeting: A Short Description

The meeting was attended by six persons: the two CEOs of the company, the head of human relations, the sales manager, a department manager, and a communications specialist who also moderated the meeting, together with the painter, who had been engaged for the event and already had moderated similar meetings for other companies.

During the meeting, the participants elucidated metaphors in regard to different themes like the appraisal of their customers and job applicants, their present and future situation, etc. In regard to the language in use, the round left the factual business language of statistics, figures, and hard facts for a metaphorical language resting on associations. They entered so to say the language of feelings, which is also a more aesthetic form of expression (see also Linstead, 2000, 2006). The painter subsequently translated the metaphors quickly into drawings.

The discussion in the management team was guided by and based on these images, whereby new drawings were created along this process. Participants also clustered drawings in order to highlight certain aspects. The atmosphere was very lively, with a lot of laughter, moving about, and intense interaction and talks. After about five hours, the team had clarified how they were seen by their customers, what potential employees expected from the company, what the current working situation looks like internally, and what strategy should be taken up concerning internal changes. The results were to be included in the further discussion of the strategy and, in addition, drawings had been created that showed internal problems and internal developments, which were subsequently used for the internal communication of this strategy. Taken as a whole, the intensity of the discussions in the meeting increased steadily: starting with alternating individual contributions through to a conjoint generation of ideas, four distinct phases of intensification can be distinguished: a warm-up, a phase of intensification, innovation, and decline.

The Participants Estimate on the Particularities of the Meeting

The participants of the meeting accordantly told, that they had been surprised at how much they had achieved within a relatively short time and how precisely and multi-faceted the central aspects of the topics had been filtered out. In particular the participants were astonished about the smoothness of the discussion, they unisonous said, that there had been less conflicts and more understanding, over all they were astonished about the smooth flow, that they sensed was unusual as the following quote illustrates: “it feels like you achieve results

faster, it is more oriented towards achieving consensus (...) we were more in a flow” (original in German, my own translation).

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis was conducted in two strands: the time structure was analysed by means of the video data, which were analysed especially with regard to the succession of arguments and themes as well as to the alternation of contributing speakers. The other strand of analysis focused on the subjective estimates of the participants as stated in the interviews. The main themes of analyses turned out to be-as it is usually the case in the practice of grounded theory-consensus versus dissent.

In order to explain the special contribution of drawings to organizational meetings with regard to consensus and dissent, I will first explain why organizational meetings are particularly imperiled to slip into conflicts (Conflicts in organizational meetings), followed by the analysis of the studied meeting (Organizational meetings as interaction systems).

Conflicts in Organizational Meetings

Organizations are particularly susceptible to conflicts, since there is a constant need for decisions and each decision is an arena for conflict. But organizations dispose of many strategies that allow conflict management. The most prominent is hierarchy that makes sure that there is always a level of higher authority, which can decide in case of conflict at a lower level. However, organizational meetings stand out from day-to-day business. They are, according to Luhmann (1964), social systems of a special kind with their own rules that are oriented at discussing a theme as equal partners. Neither hierarchy nor other themes ought to take over a discussion in a meeting. While the organization can limit the arena of conflict, in an interaction system, a conflict affects the interaction as a whole, as Kieserling (1999) stated. Kieserling (1999) defines a conflict as a negation or rejection of an argument that is communicated openly. Then we have opponents and the opponents' opposition might overtake the discussion as a whole and the original theme is in danger to be turned up side down in the sense that it is reduced to becoming a resource for further antagonism.

Organizational Meetings as Interaction Systems

Unlike context-free interactions, meetings in organizations always take place against the backdrop of the organization's activities, necessities, options, opportunities, and risks. In this sense, they are not context-free, but each topic is discussed with respect to consequences on the scale of the organization. The tricky thing is that there are many consequences one has to take into account that are not communicable because they might not exist officially. That has nothing to do with illegality or even

crime. It has to do with the unwritten rules for being regarded as competent, as a person of foresight, as liable, as someone that is able to carry through (s.th), as someone who has good ideas, etc. In sum, meetings form a stage, which offers the chance of building one's image that is important, as the image functions as a currency for positions, trust, ingress to alliances, salary, etc. In a former research, I did in a small company, the weekly meeting was nicknamed as "exhibition of the masters" indicating that the meeting was not only on specific themes, but on the place to gain mastery.

The main point why this game of gaining or losing mastery works is the temporarily of sense-making as it is described in the writing of Weick (1995): Sense evolves as each bit of speech interprets the ones before. Therefore, he asks "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick, 1995). Luhmann (1995) explains that an evolving structure of sense has to be attributed to someone as if that sense had come by a specific person. In addition, that attribution is the key to understanding the game of mastery. You have to 'catch' the right attributions and see that all the negative sense will be attributed to others.

Discussing Along Drawings

The structure of the discussion along visual metaphors offers less options for channeling attributions and in consequence of that, there are less options for the rise of conflicts. Let's have a look at what happens in a discussion along images:

The head of human relations explained that applicants see the company as a big play field, as they wish to have fun while programming. She depicts the metaphor of a "kindergarten", which is the German word for a play school. Immediately a controversial discussion started about the implied meaning, which could have gone on and on without any achieved consensus, but the discussion was interrupted by new drawings to look at. When the drawing of the "kindergarten" was hung up, everyone found aspects they liked. Most of all, the illustrated enthusiasm caught the participants' attention. Inspired by that, someone inserted the metaphor of Santa Claus and someone else imagined a dwarf workshop, which in Germany is the synonym of happy, bustling creatures working real hard. Later that day, the theme got on the agenda again and the group developed a complex image of people entering the company and getting shaped by its culture into someone different, an image they all thought was very adequate to the influence of their common culture and attitude towards work.

That episode of the meeting shows that from the same starting point "kindergarten", the discussion by word very quickly got tapped in a quarrel, something that the participants experience often in their usual meetings, as someone states: "Talking about text makes you to discuss about the meaning of each word.

That is incredibly tough and slow" (original in German, my translation). Unlike that, the work along drawings brought them forward into a result that was complex in the sense of disposing different facets and everyone appreciated that it hit the point.

The structural difference in both episodes is that while an argument in speech can be neglected, an image cannot be denied, as it speaks by its presence. The presence of the drawing has a strong bias for acceptance, which in the meeting was visible of expressing approval, in the example above for the enthusiasm perceived in the drawing.

Rejection of an image is attributed to taste and is seen as a matter of personal subjective opinion. Critique can only be communicated in a subjective form like 'I miss this or that' or 'I think we also have situations where...'. Then the discussion moves forward to a new metaphor, which does not discredit the old one. Another drawing of a new metaphor is not understood as the defeat of the first, but is always a new additional image, which stands by itself. Paintings that hang side by side can interpret each other, emphasize nuances, and reinforce statements. Alternative visual metaphors bring out new facets, amplify the discussion, and take it forward.

Because new painted metaphors are not interpreted as a substitute for a previous image, but rather improve, modify, refine, or nuance them, the abandonment of the idea for a new metaphor is not perceived as being personally defeated in a debate. The interrogated participants stated somewhat astonished that it had been easy for them to give up their position: "Everyone was able to say, yes, this is it! And then, I gave up my position (...) I gave up my metaphors a few times" (original in German, my translation).

The painted metaphor has a different quality with regard to the attribution of its content. Although art is attributed to the artist, in case of the meeting, the images were not personalized as someone's statement. As soon as an image takes on form, it seems to have its own existence and hence, the statement of the image is not attributed as a statement of a person. It seems that it relieves the person of the responsibility for its origin. That is the reason why respondents at the meeting stated that it had been easy to give up their own image for one that they thought was more accurate.

CONCLUSION

Concluding it can be stated that there are two major findings resulting from this case study of the still new method for strategy making called "Strategic Visualization" or "Strategic Visioning": First of all, it can be stated that the discussion on the basis of drawings differs widely from discussions by word. The method of detailing imagination by means of a

material representation is more target-aimed than discussions by word. The method leads to a different way of discussing the themes: it animates strong discussions that are estimated by the participants to be more concrete. Participants dig deeper into the theme, which enables them to see it from different perspectives. Hence, it can be stated that the method facilitates new insights and encourages participants to come up with fresh ideas.

Beside that, there are positive motivational effects, such as more fun and enthusiasm as the discussions were very lively, accompanied by a lot of laughter. What I think is most spectacular is that this method brings to the surface different opinions and enables participants to discuss conflicts without getting stuck in a quarrel.

The second finding concerns the explanation for these positive results. The question is, in short, which factors are reliable for these positive effects? There are two explanations that complement each other: on one hand, the results are due to the concreteness of the modeled representation coupled with the possibility to creatively remodel it. While the concreteness helps participants to think in context and to get into details, the creativity enables participants to rebuild these images, as in this case, participants clustered the paintings, remodeled their mental image, and subsequently had it worked out as a new image by the painter. That interpretation is in line with other accounts that describe how participants find new insights while constructing a representation of their reality (Burgi et al., 2004; Oliver & Roos, 2007; Roos et al., 2004; Schulz et al., 2015; Wengel et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the positive results appear to be caused on grounds of a structural change of the interaction system by the drawings themselves. It seems to be the materialized visibility of the drawings that is liable for the smooth and constructive flow of the discussion. The images have an impact that becomes a “sort of identity” of their own, structuring the discussion, but not in the sense of being a person (Latour, 1993), as objects will not take part in the micropolitical strife for positions, power, and influence. They rather seem to have a calming, enabling influence, as they don’t move.

That explanation reaches far beyond the explanation presented by other researchers, who attributed the positive results to the framing of the workshops as playful (Burgi et al., 2005; Roos et al., 2004). Although it does make sense that framing a workshop as playful will be vitally important to the success of such a workshop, that does not explain why people quarrel so little and discuss in such a strikingly constructive manner, even though conflicts do show up. The structural explanation presented here also sets a question mark to the psychological explanation of the hand-mind interaction of Burgi et al. (2005). That particular condition was not the case in my study as participants worked

with drawings that were painted by an illustrator, so they did not work with their hands at all. Nevertheless, my research does likewise show the positive findings that Burgi et al. (2005) observed, mentioned as “first major finding” above.

It has to be conceded though that the results presented in this study do not confound a hand-mind interaction in general due to a lack of comparability of the case study presented here with the one of Burgi et al. (2005). In both studies, “fresh insights” and “new perspectives” are observed but the quality of these insights and perspectives cannot be compared. Whether a workshop using three-dimensional techniques for modeling brings about more profound insights would need further research in order to be answered. If material objects “speak” in a strategy meeting without being interviewed into the micro politics of an organization that could be a remedy for balancing these meetings and challenging subtle games of power that influence or even undermine such workshops below-threshold. Although that finding is an interesting hint to a new level of explanation, it has to be considered that it was achieved by an explorative case study. The relation of material objects and the structure of an interactional system like a strategy meeting, therefore, would need further testing on a broader scale in order to substantiate that assumption.

Other limitations of the research concern the following coherences that obviously stayed unexplored: The first pertains to the appropriateness of the representation. Would the outcome of a strategy meeting also be good, if the participants created only a poor representation of their strategy? The second pertains to the way the strategy meeting is moderated. It is possible that a poor moderation might come out with poor results. Obviously, the motivational side, the leading, and embedding of such a meeting are important as well. The third pertains to the character of the material representation itself: Is it foremost important that there is a materialized representation at all or does the material itself influence the outcome? These three side conditions already show that there are many questions for further research in this field that would give advice on how to advance the method further.

Summing up though it can be concluded that workshops using concrete representations of reality enhance a rich interpretation of that reality. The aesthetic dimension of materialized concreteness allows to bring back in a symbolic way, a rich experience into strategy making, enhancing “thick” knowledge to emerge. But noth with standing these other conditions, there is a positive impact of a (good) material representation on bringing “thick” knowledge and lively discussions into strategy making. The lesson for consultants and moderators of strategy workshops is that if one really wants to find a new way of doing things and is open for a change in strategy, that method offers a way to let new knowledge and fresh opinions merge into th

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— This article does not have any appendix. —