

Okja (2017)

Unplugged - Voices

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Management and organization research has much to gain in taking inspiration from the arts, culture and humanities, not only in rethinking its practices, but also to nourish its own perspectives. Life in organizations is artificially separate from ordinary life: all mundane objects are conducive to astonishment, inspiration, and even problematization. The Unplugged subsection “Voices” gives academics and non-academics the opportunity to deliver an interpretation of an object from the cultural or artistic world. The objects chosen for interpretation may or may not be directly related to organizational life, may or may not resonate with the moment, but do share some intriguing features. These interpretations form a patchwork of variations on the same object.

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INTRODUCTION

Bong Joon-ho, a South Korean film director, recently hit the news and got considerable public attention by winning the Palme d'Or at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival for his latest movie *Parasite*. This issue of M@n@gement's Unplugged "Voices" explores his previous movie *Okja*, his sixth feature film.

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Okja is a 'super pig': she belongs to a new species created by the multinational corporation Mirando. Super pigs are marketed by Mirando (an agro-food company) as a revolutionary invention that can reconcile global meat consumption with a decreased environmental footprint. For 10 years, *Okja* is raised in a remote forest of Korea by Mija – an orphaned child who is the other hero of the movie. Life goes on peacefully until the two friends/sisters are separated when the company reclaims its property to showcase *Okja* as the brand's icon. Mija then puts all her stubborn love and courage into saving *Okja* from her owners and brings her back home, away from the industrial and organizational world.

While the movie was largely acclaimed by critics, the context surrounding the creation and distribution of *Okja* may have overshadowed its content. The movie was at the center of a controversy during the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. As the first movie produced and exclusively distributed by Netflix, the platform decided to restrict access to its own subscribers, thus preventing traditional cinema networks from showing the movie. These circumstances gave rise to a vigorous debate at Cannes, contesting the legitimacy of the movie to formally compete for the Palme d'Or.

This edition of "Voices" focuses on the content of the movie rather than on the context of its creation, however this episode illustrates how *Okja* constitutes a case of institutional and technological disruption, and also makes it clear that *Okja* is a movie which cuts across genres and questions established boundaries. The narrative structure of *Okja* resembles a fairy tale while borrowing heavily from the genres of science fiction and adventure. The movie also constantly questions the boundaries between animals and humans, childhood and adulthood, public and private issues, fiction and reality, nature, culture and artificial beings, individuals and organizations, and animals, pets and food. In the end, the movie touches upon a wide range of issues and is far less binary and simple than it may seem at first.

As a movie about boundaries, *Okja* is a perfect candidate for "Voices", which questions how objects from cultural and artistic worlds may infuse research on organizations. This edition of Voices is composed of two essays:

- Alf Rehn explores the movie through the theme of childhood, as *Okja* develops the unlikely encounter between a child and a corporation. He investigates the complex relationships between childhood and the corporate world. Both in practice and in research, management tend to deny agency to children. Alf Rehn shows how the movie simultaneously reifies and questions this dichotomy between children and corporations, and uses the movie to invite management scholars to reconsider children and their agency vis-à-vis organizations.

- In my own essay, I explore how *Okja* questions the boundaries between nature, culture and technology. I show how *Okja* may be read as a manifesto questioning the role of technology as a solution to global sustainability issues, and propose an analysis based on the philosophy of Jacques Ellul, which offers a good lens to make sense of the role of the corporation, stakeholders, and Technique in the movie.

As both essays make clear, *Okja* illustrates how fiction and science fiction offer fruitful ways to envision narratives for potential social answers to environmental challenges and to question our assumptions and theories (Gendron et al. 2017; Rumpala 2018; Peper 2017). Fiction and science fiction may also have performative properties (Austin 1962), as they are able to shape behaviors in powerful ways. *Okja* is also an illustration of this phenomenon: according to different observers, *Okja* has prompted many viewers to stop eating meat and adopt vegetarianism, suggesting that it may be a more powerful narrative than documentary reports on the agri-food industry. We hope the perspectives offered in this edition of *Voices* will inspire readers and make them want to watch the movie and consider its implications for management research.

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OKJA MEETS ELLUL: NATURE, CULTURE, AND LIFE IN THE IRON CAGE OF THE TECHNICAL SYSTEM

*Everywhere there's lots of piggies
Living piggy lives
You can see them out for dinner
With their piggy wives
Clutching forks and knives
To eat their bacon !*

George Harrison, Piggies, The White Album (1968)

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In the opening scene of the movie *Okja* (Bong, 2017), we discover Lucy Mirando, the newly appointed CEO of a historically controversial company, leading a corporate event to promote Mirando's latest biotechnological miracle: a new breed of genetically modified "super pigs". According to her, this revolution in the livestock industry will offer an affordable, natural (super pigs are falsely advertised as non-GMO) eco-friendly, low-carbon solution to make food and meat accessible for the masses. In a patient effort to renew its corporate values and image and gain customer/stakeholder trust, the biotech company organizes a 10-year long competition, offering selected local farmers the privilege to raise one of its super pigs, one of which will become the iconic Mirando Super Pig.

Our super pigs will not only be big and beautiful, they will also leave a minimal footprint on the environment, consume less feed, and produce less excretions. And most importantly... they need to taste fucking good!

Lucy Mirando (in *Okja*, 2017)

Ten years later, we meet *Okja* in real life, living a quiet, happy and peaceful super-piggy life somewhere in the Korean wilderness. *Okja* was raised away from civilization by Mija, an orphan, and her aging grandfather. Together, they live a reclusive life in an Eden-like place of untouched and unspoiled nature, where the only connection with the outside world is an old dysfunctional TV that her grandpa watches at night. For Mija, *Okja* is far more than a livestock animal: she's her best friend and sister, the one who shared – and saved – her life after she lost her parents.

Unfortunately, a gift is never free in capitalist societies. And Mirando soon closes this pastoral interlude when the company reclaims *Okja* as its property to conduct its public relations campaign and launch the mass production of its super pigs. From that moment on, *Okja* and Mija find themselves brutally thrown into a world of organizations, production, spectacle, corporate communication, lies, betrayal, cruelty, violence and death that they will try to escape.

The movie touches upon a vast array of key topics for scholars interested in organizations, social issues in management and sustainability: the commodification of life and nature; ethical issues involved in mechanistic types of organizations; how bureaucracies treat life and may industrialize death; food and organizations; the relationships and

bonds between humans, animals and other non-humans; legal rights and non-humans; NGOs and business interactions; business green-washing, organizational hypocrisy; the “dark-side” of CSR and promises of “shared value creation” in contested industries; board room politics; paranoid leadership; hegemonic corporate communication and propaganda; and so on.

All these topics are central, and some remain partly (or largely) overlooked by mainstream theories of sustainability, in particular those related to animal life, the process of commodifying nature, and the related ethical issues. However, viewing the movie from a management scholar’s perspective, I was puzzled at first: I found myself wondering what the movie had to offer on each of these topics, as they are often treated in a rather caricatured and binary fashion. *Okja* is definitely not a film of great nuance about organizational life or business and society interactions. Quite the contrary! It should be looked at as a fable, one that does not hesitate to use caricature to develop a sharp satire and radical critique of our society. Instead of looking for one specific line of inquiry, it is better to make sense of the movie through a systemic perspective that puts the pieces together into a larger and more coherent whole, revealing the overarching structure that organizes all the other pieces. A perspective that combines and articulates managerial, ecological and technical issues.

ELLUL AND TECHNIQUE

I have no idea whether Bong Joon-Ho is familiar with Jacques Ellul’s work on the inescapable rise of technology, its impact on society and its consequences on individual freedom. Probably not, but it is not entirely impossible as South Korea was, along with the US, one country where Ellul’s writings were translated and had significant influence (more than in France, where Ellul was largely overlooked during his lifetime). In any case, Ellul provides a fascinating lens to make sense of *Okja*’s world. As I will argue, both *Okja* and *Mija* are true Ellulian heroes escaping the “Technical System”.

Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) was initially trained as a lawyer. He was also a Protestant (he wrote on theology and religion) and anarchist. Apart from theology, he wrote about 50 books dealing with the role of technology, freedom, revolt and revolution. In light of contemporary issues about technology and environmental issues, Ellul appears as one of the early thinkers on the role of technology in society, calling for a contemporary re-examination. He was fascinated by Marxism, from which he adopted a vision of a historical materialism of society shaped by wider macro forces, as well as the central concept of alienation. At the same time, Ellul distanced himself from the Marxist view of history, revolution and dialectics. According to Ellul, Marx had disregarded the central role of technology, which had become the key driver for social evolution and alienation in the 20th century.

In this review, I will mostly refer to Ellul’s writings on “Technique” (Ellul, 1988, 1977, 1967, 1954). In his work, Ellul introduces an analytical distinction between specific technologies and Technique (what he also refers to as the “technological system”). The technological system is at the same time linked to and standing apart from the direct experience of technologies (such as machines, electricity or techniques). “Technique is the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency

(for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.” (*The Technological Society*, 1964: xxv; originally published in French in 1954). For researchers in organizations, Ellul’s concept of Technique appears to be related to Weber’s notion of *rationalization* (Weber). Indeed, for Ellul, Technique has various applications in work organization technologies (such as Taylorism) or public organization (with the emergence of bureaucracies). Ellul uses the concept of the “technological system” to stress the increasing interdependence of technological sub-elements (which creates both complexity, inertia and risks), and to convey the idea that Technique tends to acquire its own autonomy. Technique, he argues, has become a mode of thinking, an ideology and the new “milieu” in which humans evolve. As Technique grows in society, it tends to become both less and more dependent on human intervention and more and more influential on individual identities, aspirations and behaviors.

Here are a few elements that I think are central in Ellul’s theorization of Technique and the technological society:

- Technique is neither good, nor bad, nor neutral. It is *fundamentally* ambivalent, conveying simultaneously good and bad impacts. It is not neutral in the sense that technologies are self-determined: they bear their own logic of use, and cannot be completely shaped by different types of use.

- Technique is autonomous. For Ellul, Technique is largely immune to external influence from the State or other sources of political power (as it obeys the laws it creates), economic power (which is generally at the service of technology), or normative judgments. Technique tends to neutralize external moral judgments by substituting functional efficiency as the only relevant norm. In this process of sacralization of Technique, all other ends and means are subsumed to the support of technical progress, which becomes an end in itself.

- Technique is self-perpetuating and self-extending: the problems created by Technique (such as pollution or demographic problems) are to be solved through technological innovation. Ellul mentions Gabor’s law, saying “all that is technically feasible will be done eventually”. If social norms prohibit some uses of technology (such as genetics), then those norms will tend to shift over time to make the innovation possible. And once technologies are implemented and diffused, it becomes harder and harder to avoid using them (as an illustration of this technical capture, the author of this review had to subscribe to Netflix to access *Okja*, since the movie was not distributed in the cinema network).

- Last, while Technique creates progress and extends individual choices and capacities, it also alienates humans by distracting them from nature and from central dimensions of their humanity. First, Technique takes away the ability to make autonomous moral judgments. By dividing work among various experts and operational workers in charge of a small facet of each problem, it diverts human attention from the big picture and narrows it down to the scope of the technical activity at hand. As a result, individuals are made less responsible and never question the meaning of their activities or the system, or their ethical and social relevance. Furthermore, while technology is presented as providing comfort and freedom for all, it creates conformity in behaviors and individual desires. For these reasons, Technique is a source of alienation. In this des-humanized world where individuals feel the absurdity and meaninglessness of the technical society, media and spectacle play a central role in distracting humans from their alienated condition.

OKJA AND THE TECHNICAL SYSTEM

I took nature and science, and I synthesized. And everyone loved it!
Lucy Mirando (in *Okja*, 2017)

In its content and radical tone, *Okja* strongly resonates with Ellul's approach to Technique. As *Okja* and her super pig mates were created by Mirando's engineers through genetic manipulations, they are a direct manifestation/incarnation of Technique. *Okja* perfectly illustrates the self-extending property of Technique, as it constitutes the technological response to problems created by Technique itself: *Okja* is supposed to solve the environmental impact of the food industry, without compromising our collective habit of consuming meat.

[I was trained] At a highly-respected institute for the advancement of human potential where many forward-looking CEOs go. And you know what I was doing when I was at the institute? I was visualizing new and better ways of doing business. While my sister was CEO, dumping so much toxic waste into that lake that it exploded – the only lake ever to explode, well done Nancy! – I was visualizing ways of turning the most hated agrochemical company in the world into the most likeable miracle pig-rearing company. And it's working! It's working! It was working until last night, until six hours ago. The synthesis of old Mirando and new Mirando was impeccable.
Lucy Mirando (in *Okja*, 2017)

Producing super pigs amounts to artificially engineering life. This technological innovation expands the scope of Technique to new horizons, both from practical and ethical points of view. Life (or more specifically animal life) is still viewed as sacred by many people in society. Therefore, creating new species and mass producing them constitutes an unprecedented move, requiring justifications from the company. This "new synthesis of science and nature" needs to be legitimized and justified on moral grounds. For this reason, Mirando is careful to use rhetoric based on sustainability and to frame its innovation as creating shared value for business and society (Porter and Kramer, 2011, 2006). This illustrates how sustainability, CSR, or "shared value" rhetoric may constitute a critical framing tool for managers to legitimize and justify innovations in situations of technical uncertainty and social controversy. This is particularly relevant in the field of biotechnology and illustrates the dark side of such corporate win-win rhetoric (Crane et al., 2014).

The way Lucy Mirando justifies her new credo in social responsibility illustrates another central theme in the work of Ellul: how technical rationality manages to take precedence over all other values and virtues. Indeed, for Lucy Mirando, responsibility has no value in itself. It is just a sign of visionary leadership, a means to achieve maximum efficiency and performance. And this pledge to social responsibility should not mask the true hegemonic intentions of the company. Instead of democratizing Technique, this discourse imposes a frame of reference that is created by the company, for the company, and cannot be contested by outside groups. As the reaction against the activists from the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) illustrates, violence remains the only response to external stakeholders who express criticism of the company and try to impose a different system of reference (here animal protection).

The movie reflects another of Ellul's recurrent themes: one cannot stop technological progress. In other words, Technique stands above human action. Super pigs must exist, because Technique has decided so. When the ALF hacks (and ruins) the CEO's communications campaign by publicly revealing the violence done to super pigs, everything is already set to replace her and change course. Even before Lucy is aware of it, her twin sister Nancy is already back, taking the reins of the company and launching the production of super pigs her own way, without wasting time on organizational window dressing. Lucy has been cheated by Frank, her closest manager who discretely organized her sisters' comeback. The message is clear: Technique is above humans and the vanity of power. The feeling of personal power, even in the hands of a narcissistic CEO, is nothing but a delusion.

NATURE, CULTURE AND TECHNIQUE

The movie is built around a stark separation between nature and culture, a dichotomy that also constitutes a central theme in Ellul's work. This is also a major theme for anthropologists of nature, like Philippe Descola who has studied different ontologies of nature, i.e. systems of organizing relationships between humans and non-humans (Descola, 2005). According to Descola, Western cultures are built on naturalism, a system of representation based on a clear-cut distinction between nature and culture, and between humans and non-humans. Within this system, humans and non-humans obey the same physical laws (there is continuity in "physicality"), but humans are thought to radically differ from non-humans because of their conscience (there is difference in "interiority"). The vision of machine-animals, developed by Descartes (1637), illustrates this distinction. In this perspective, animals are considered as machines, reacting to stimuli, totally devoid of feelings, thought or conscience. In this dual perspective, man is the only species endowed with rationality and conscience (as recalled by Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum*). This construction of "nature", by placing humans simultaneously outside and above nature, has played a critical role in our ability to domesticate nature, engineer and transform it by treating life and living beings as inert objects. In France, until recently, animals were legally considered as inert furniture property belonging to their owners, before a 2015 law finally reframed their identity as "sensitive living beings", opening the door to recognizing animal rights.

For Ellul, Technique and modernity have gradually domesticated nature. Formerly, nature was sacred, but it has gradually been domesticated and transformed by Technique into an object like any other. In this process, nature loses this sacred status.

The movie *Okja* reproduces this stark separation between nature and culture. When *Okja* is at home in the mountains of South Korea, the film presents an idealized vision of nature, depicting a pure pastoral "state of nature" that lies outside society. In this clearly romanticized vision of nature, no clear boundaries separate humans from non-humans: they live in a state of harmony, bound together by a community of destiny and sentiments. By contrast, modernity and culture are associated with alienation, cruelty, facade, and falsehood. Modernity separates man from nature.

The movie shows how modernity is built on sharp distinctions between humans and non-humans, and at the same time points to the weaknesses, artificiality and inherent contradictions of such a distinction. The movie questions the “true” identity of Okja and other protagonists: Okja, initially a super pig meant to produce affordable meat, becomes Mija’s giant pet, capable of trust, friendship and cleverness (when, for example she saves Mija’s life). In the slaughterhouse, super pigs are further humanized, resembling prisoners in a concentration camp, finding a way to save one of theirs when Mija finally manages to escape. As they collectively moan in the middle of night, they know what is about to happen. The pigs actually appear more human than the human protagonists who were able to design such technology.

By humanizing super pigs and de-humanizing humans, the movie questions the artificial boundary between humans and non-humans and reveals our incoherence and moral inconsistencies: what happens if we take into consideration the feelings and sentiments of animals, only bred by man for productive purposes? What if a super pig becomes a pet, actually more sensible and capable of empathy than humans? Of course the answer is clear: it is a collective sin that must be hidden.

TECHNIQUE AND FUNCTIONAL STUPIDITY

In the movie, it is striking that all characters belonging to modern society (what Ellul would call “technical society”) have been profoundly corrupted and alienated by it. Okja (the super pig) and Mija (her young friend), the two characters that are closest to nature, are by far the cleverest and most human characters in the movie. Both Okja and Mija grew up in nature, away from the technical society and the absurdity that goes with it.

All the other human characters are either stupid, untrustworthy, unstable, weak, cowardly or deeply neurotic (or a combination of these traits). The corporate managers working around Lucy Mirando offer a perfect illustration of the concept of “functional stupidity” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), characterized by a lack of reflexivity, an avoidance of justifications and a lack of substantive and moral reasoning from organizational members. The only clever manager at Mirando is Frank, a top manager close to the CEO Lucy Mirando (and also to her twin sister) acting cowardly, and who will only use his political skills to coldly betray Lucy when her time has come. In this corporate world, there is no-one to question the overall logic and ethics of the system they are embedded in. People simply “do their job”.

Apart from top managers, functional stupidity is also widespread among shop floor workers/operators. In the last part of the movie, we discover the slaughterhouse, a factory that industrializes death on a massive scale, strongly reminding us of concentration camps. Once again, workers – all Spanish-speaking – focus on a tiny portion of work without questioning its meaning and moral content (even when it involves administering death to a living animal). As Ellul recalls, Technique requires no reflection, it demands reflex.

A welcome surprise in the movie is that functional stupidity is not confined to the company. In the movie, all organizations – corporations, media companies and NGOs – are equally plagued by functional stupidity. Even the organized groups fighting against the excesses of the technical

society seem perverted by it. The ALF activist group also reveals such functional stupidity, albeit to a lesser extent¹. Silver, one member of the ALF team, is so radical in his determination to decrease his ecological footprint that he barely feeds himself. And Kay, who serves as translator for the activist group, is ready to betray both Mija and Okja in order to pursue the mission at all cost, even if it means exposing Okja to abuses and possibly death (a core contradiction for a group fighting for the rights and wellbeing of animals). Due to his deliberate miss-translation of Mija (who asks him to bring Okja back home), the group wrongly believes that she agrees to send Okja to the US to help the ALF publicly reveal and denounce the practices of Mirando. He will only confess his betrayal when discovering the abuses inflicted by Mirando on Okja.

[Mija] never agreed to send us Okja... [...] I lied... [...] I don't know, at that moment... it's just that I couldn't... I couldn't stop the mission. This is the coolest mission ever, I have all the [equipment] stuff and... (Kay, translator and ex-member of the ALF)

IS THERE A WAY OUT OF THE “TECHNICAL IRON CAGE” ?

Okja paints a gloomy picture of the technical society, and the end of the movie does not offer very high hopes for change... First, because the organizational action initiated by the ALF against Mirando is limited by many weaknesses.

At the end of the movie, Mija finally saves Okja from the slaughterhouse, and they return to their Eden. This may be interpreted as a happy ending where Okja, Mija, the grandfather, and the young super pig saved from the slaughterhouse are once again at peace. However, this false happy ending leaves a bitter taste, as both Okja and Mija are forever changed by what happened. They escaped horror but did not change the system, and they know that the mass production and mass murder of Okja's peers continues. The system has not changed, for changing it is beyond the power of an individual.

Once again, this false happy ending is largely consistent with how Ellul envisioned possible ways for people to free themselves from the Technical Society. When Ellul wrote about revolt and revolution in the sixties and seventies (when many civil society members were expecting revolution to occur), he considered that revolutions were doomed to fail: social contestations are bound to be integrated into the technical system, which internalizes social critique as a way of renewing itself. Moreover, any institutionalization of a social movement seeking to take power from the top is likely to corrupt it (Ellul was an anarchist). As revolution becomes impossible, it is replaced by revolt, which is also ineffective because of its unstructured and unfocused form of opposition rooted in despair and without clear enemies.

For Ellul, change is not totally impossible, but it has to take less institutionalized mechanisms. First, emancipation must take place at the individual (and then local) level, through an ethic of simplicity, austerity, slowness that reverses the natural dynamics of Technique. And change must materialize in an ethic of “decreasing power” (*éthique de la “non puissance” ou du “non-pouvoir”*) (Ellul, 2014), where free individuals, who do not fall into the idolatry of Technique, deliberately decide *not* to obey or

1. However, it is a pity that Boon drops this symmetry between the ALF and the corporation in the second part of his movie, falling back on a more classic and expected distinction between the ‘good guys’ (the ALF members who try to right their wrongs) and the ‘bad guys’ (the corporation, with Lucy Mirando confessing her obvious lies as a necessary evil)

act according to the technical system.

In this view, the end of *Okja* takes on another meaning: Okja and Mija are true Ellulian heroes emancipated from the Technical System. They are aware of the alienating dimension of Technique and decide to change, leave and experience nature instead of trying to change the system through more conventional political channels.

CONCLUSION

As *Okja* shares many elements with Ellul's concept of Technique, it is no surprise that they can be criticized for the same types of reasons. Both offer quite a radical, bleak and deterministic stance on technology, modernity and its role in society. While they may be criticized for proposing a caricatured and Frankensteinian view of Technique, standing against progress, they also espouse an idealized and romantic view of nature (and of pre-modern societies) that is not strongly influenced by Technique. They both tend to reproduce the idea of a clear separation between nature and culture, which they intend to fight. By framing ecology against modernity, they do not point to clear solutions other than escaping modernity and returning to an idealized state of nature.

Important work in social studies of science and technology has taken a very different route, focusing on cases of *democratizing technology* (Callon et al., 2001; Feenberg, 1999), where stakeholders can play an active role in shaping technological debates. And with his "imperative of responsibility", Jonas (1979) paved the way towards introducing precautionary principles in situations of uncertainty about the potential impacts of technology, promoting a more responsible approach to technological development.

At the same time, those perspectives should not mask the contemporary relevance of both Ellul and *Okja's* messages about the ever expanding and alienating potential of Technique, as well as the ethical issues raised by this expansion:

-In a strange echo after the movie *Okja* was launched, Vigilance OGM, a Canadian NGO campaigning against GMOs, reported that AquaBounty Technologies had commercialized its first genetically modified salmon in Canada in 2017, without any specific product information for clients. As explained by *The Guardian* (9 August 2017), "Originally developed by a group of Canadian scientists at Newfoundland's Memorial University, the salmon can grow twice as fast as conventionally farmed Atlantic salmon, reaching adult size in some 18 months as compared to 30 months. The product also requires 25% less feed to grow to the size of wild salmon, and could have a carbon footprint of up to 25 times less, the company has claimed"².

-Beyond GM food, our collective answer to environmental issues shows our faith in technical progress, as well as the self-extending property of technology. Instead of changing individual behaviors, decreasing our level of consumption and waste generation, and trying to limit our dependence on energy, the further development of technical innovation is considered the only legitimate answer to

2. www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/09/genetically-modified-salmon-sales-canada-aqua-bounty

environmental challenges. In Silicon Valley, environmental preservation is becoming a new technological utopia, with Tesla and its founder Elon Musk as icons. In addition to switching the automotive industry to electric vehicles (without questioning the availability of raw materials), Musk presents the colonization of Mars as the only viable answer to our environmental challenges... And to answer the perceived dangers of Artificial Intelligence to humans (with technology literally threatening life and gaining power over humans), Musk proposes to enhance human capabilities through neurological implants that would boost our capabilities. Debates on transhumanism, enhanced humans, and artificial intelligence (Kurzweil and Grossman, 2009) illustrate how technology is now deeply transforming and reshaping man itself in a quest to catch up with the technological progress it created.

-Apart from conventional government regulation, digital technologies tend to design and internalize their own regulations through code and architecture (Lessig, 1999; Morozov, 2014a). Once considered as a “stateless” tool (i.e. a space free from state regulation) to promote communitarian and libertarian values, the web, digital technologies, cellphones, and other digital tools create strongly centralized and alienating governance devices through individual rankings, ratings, and a panopticon type of control (Bhagat, 2016).

-Concepts such as “smart city” or “sharing economy” show how technology and science promise to solve our social and environmental challenges. It seems that technological solutionism (Morozov, 2014b) is, more than ever, the major paradigm for thinking about potential solutions to social and environmental issues.

-Environmental protection, sustainability and CSR are only considered legitimate if they do not hurt value creation and corporate strategic interests. In light of the huge discrepancies between official discourses and actual practices, and the use of environmental concerns as a way to accelerate technological innovation, Wright and Nyberg (2015) analyze corporate environmentalism as a process of “creative self-destruction”, in which environmental practices actually slow down regulations and corporate change.

-In the same vein, there is mounting evidence of the difficulty to ban or regulate existing technologies when they represent a threat to the environment or cannot be easily substituted, even when there is a social or scientific consensus to do so. The recent debates around glyphosate license extension in Europe constitutes a good illustration of such problems, with the Commission finally recommending a 5-year extension (instead of the initial 10-year recommendation)³. And while scientific studies warn about the collapse of bee colonies in Europe (studies estimate that 80% of the bee population has disappeared in the last 30 years in Germany, and honey production has been divided by three over the same period in France), and point to neonicotinoid and pesticides as a major threat to bees and insects, France has just approved in October 2017 a new neonicotinoid called Sulfoxaflor⁴.

3. www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-health-glyphosate/eu-commission-proposes-five-year-extension-for-herbicide-glyphosate-idUSKBN1CW0SN

4. www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2017/10/19/un-nouveau-neonicotinoide-autorise-en-france_5203468_3244.html

So, in the end, it is true that Okja and Ellul depict a dystopic society driven by technology that may appear to be science-fiction. But at the same time, one striking feature of postmodern societies is its ability to catch up with science-fiction.

*Entre tes doigts l'argile prend forme
L'homme de demain sera hors norme
Un peu de glaise avant la fournaise qui me durcira
Je n'étais qu'une ébauche au pied de la falaise
Un extrait de roche sous l'éboulis
Dans ma cité lacustre à broyer des fadaises*

*Malaxe
Le cœur de l'automate
Malaxe, malaxe
les omoplastes
Malaxe
le thorax
Issu de toi, Issue de moi
On s'est hissés sur un piédestal
Et du haut de nous deux on a vu
Et du haut de nous deux on a vu*

Malaxe, in. Fantaisie Militaire (1998)

Alain Bashung / Edith Fambuena / Jean Marie Fauque / Jean-Louis Pierot

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THE CURIOUS CASE OF CHILDREN AND THE CORPORATION: CAPITALISM, CORRUPTION AND CONTESTED CHILDHOODS IN *OKJA*

INTRODUCTION

Management and organization studies has traditionally been practiced and presented as dealing solely with organization as a field of serious, adult endeavors. Whilst there are a few instances in which the connections between childhood and the world of management have been inquired into (see e.g. Hunter & Kivinen 2016, Ingersoll & Adams 1992, Kavanagh 2013, Rehn 2009), such connections have often been either marginalized or made invisible. In fact, one could argue that the phenomena of children and childhood have been something of a trauma, actively excluded from the field, possibly based on the romantic notion that childhood is an innocent age that should be shielded and protected from the world of e.g. business and management. Whilst there are cases where such a position is understandable and laudable, such as when one strives to combat child labor, the fact is that children are far more engaged with organizational and business life than is usually acknowledged – as audiences, as consumers, as stakeholders, and as actors affecting organizational life (as anyone who has worked in an organization can attest, things such as children’s illnesses can have a direct and measurable effect on work). This, again, is often addressed as if children were a mere passive audience or an external irritant, with no real agency of their own. What such an approach overlooks is the agency of children, their capacity to establish preferences and make choices, as well as the way in which the very notion of childhood can be marshaled to establish specific perspectives or link to certain affects. In short, children and childhood present a problem and a challenge for management and organization studies, by at the same time establishing an assumed Other to the serious, rational, adult world of organization, and by at the same time being inexorably linked to the same. I will in the following discuss this challenge by way of a reading of the movie *Okja*, and the complex multitude of references this establishes to notions of childhood.

The question at the core of this piece is the following: “What role should children and childhood play in our understanding of business, management, and organization?”. Rather than assuming that children should be excluded from these realms, I will argue that they are always already present, either as attempted exclusions or as active agents, and that popular culture can be a productive lens through which we can analyze our often dismissive ideas about childhood in the world of business management. By way of a reading of a Netflix-produced movie, released to considerable attention from the world media, I will make a series of comments regarding how we view children, the corporation, capitalism, and challenging boundaries, in order to inquire into the establishment of management and organization studies as a field. By way of a supernatural pig.

THE WORLD OF *OKJA*

Bong Joon-ho’s *Okja* is at heart a simple fable executed as a superhero movie, if one with two rather unusual protagonists. The core

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story is one of a girl and her beloved pet, but placed in a context where a corporation can wield great and terrible powers, and where both a girl and her companion pig can have powers beyond the ordinary. The powers of the pig are established early on, explained away as stemming from a mixture of fortuitous discovery and the power of corporate R&D. The powers of the girl seems to stem from her sheer love and devotion to the aforementioned pig, and are deployed more according to narrative necessity than a more coherent logic. The basic story is very simple: Girl has a beloved pig, a company takes said pig, girl takes the pig back – if with the typical shenanigans, failed attempts and the likes thrown in.

Fundamentally, *Okja* follows a common trope in popular culture depictions of and for children, a trope we might here refer to as “the child and the oddity”. Classically, this might have referred to a child and a monster (such as in tales of e.g. Frankenstein), but has also been deployed in tales of children and dragons (such as in the whimsical *Pete and the Dragon*), children and aliens (such as in *E.T.*), or children and e.g. Bigfoot (such as in the under-appreciated *Harry and the Hendersons*). In all such cases, the assumed purity and naturalness of children is juxtaposed with the alien presence of an Other, something that is presented as both having an affinity with and a distinct difference to the child. Children, and childhood more generally, are in such depictions presented as potential bridges or media through which one can establish a connection between the Other and the serious, adult world. The child then, becomes a form of minor Other, capable of navigating both the world of adults and organizations, and the world of nature and wonder. It is an idealized image, but one surprisingly prevalent in both popular culture and our social unconscious.

The nemesis or adversary in *Okja* is the Mirando corporation, and it’s CEO Lucy Mirando. Representing the adult world, with its notions about profit, ownership and control, it stands as a marked counterpoint to the natural innocence of the girl Mija and her super-pig. Curiously enough, the CEO of Mirando is herself introduced as something of a child, sporting braces and making references to her “terrible” grandfather. Giggly, bouncy and played with a hint of trying too hard, Lucy Mirando represents an interesting hybrid – the ingénue as executive, but also the CEO trying to tap into the positive image of youth. No more old capitalism, hooray for the new corporation! (Spoiler alert: Her more “adult” sister comes in as a villain later in the movie, re-establishing herself, as an agent of adulthood, as the CEO.) Mirando itself exhibits few of these markers of childhood, however, instead inhabiting a world of steely office towers, bored receptionists, bumbling security guards, and a wide range of salarymen. So whilst the CEO is new, the organization remains a bulwark of traditionalism – right down to the gender roles.

Okja the super-pig is, as usual in stories of this kind, a hybrid. Presented as both childlike and powerful, she is in a sense a Big Kid, cheerfully anarchic and headstrong. Carefree about her flatulence and defecating where she pleases, the super-pig stands as yet another counterpoint to the world of corporate capitalism, a gigantic body that is impossible to contain, to ignore, or to properly fit into an Excel-sheet. If the girl Mija represents the soul, and the corporation represents the mind, *Okja* is all body – thus establishing not only the basic structural elements of the tale, but a classical structure of separation. In the conclusion of the movie, this is further strengthened when *Okja* hides a baby super-pig in her mouth, thus also establishing her body as maternal protection.

Child vs. Corporation

As is so often the case with popular culture, *Okja* both reinforces and challenges stereotypical ways to view and talk of the world. For someone from management and organization studies, it for instances re-establishes the notion that children, by default, exist in a different world than corporations, and that breaching this separation is a problem. Mija lives in something akin to a rural utopia, a world of verdant forests and clear babbling brooks. The outside world is far away, and the only real adult supervision comes from her old, doting father, who lets Mija and Okja play as they please. Mirando, on the other hand, occupies a world of factories and skyscrapers, a busy world with cubicles and complex transports. This is a constructed world, one where everything reminds us of the man-made, one with endless commodities.

Management and organization studies has been surprisingly keen to keep up this image, even though it is manifestly artificial. Consult any key textbook on organization theory or behavior, and children will almost always be completely written out of the same. Read through journals in management studies, and children are rarely if ever mentioned. Although this exclusion is in all likelihood primarily unconscious, it still represents a central trauma at the heart of the field(s). Organizations, management and business are seen as quintessentially adult phenomena, and the world of children and childhood is to be kept separate from this. We might even say that the social unconscious of our fields treat any breach of this separation as perversion or defilement. To move the world of corporations into the life-world of children is seen as a form of corruption, wherefore we have laws against marketing to kids and find child labor abhorrent. At the same time, entering children into the world of companies is seen as less morally problematic but still epistemologically perverse.

We can see this play out in *Okja* as Mija first comes to a Mirando office to demand return of her pig. She is stopped by a glass barrier, behind which is a reception desk, manned by an adult female. Both the barrier and the receptionist attempt to keep Mija out, and after she tries to use an intercom she is brusquely dismissed. Undeterred, Mija charges at the glass door, throwing her rather small body against it, and doesn't only get in, she shatters the entire glass wall. The entry of the child into the organization is thus marked as something akin to a desecration, one that causes the very structural elements that mark the institution to collapse.

Yet, this notion of stable barriers between the two spheres of childhood and the corporation is of course absurd. Although there has been a concentrated effort to write children out of organization studies, they are always already present in the same. For instance, it is a well documented if almost completely un-researched fact that organizational actors engage in what I've called "child-work", i.e. negotiating how things such as taking children to and from child-care and school is arranged, how children's illnesses can both affect the capacity of people to work and quite materially spread in an organization (with parents as carriers), and how things such as collections for e.g. school trips and "take your child to work"-days are handled. In a larger organization, time spent on these kinds of "child-work" can be considerable. Parenthood, specifically parental leave, has of course been noted in the HRM-literature, but usually as a kind of aberration to the smooth functioning of the corporation, and rarely if ever in a manner that would afford the child agency. Similarly, there is today a tendency to address some child-work, but under the guise of "life-work balance", again marginalizing children and rendering them invisible. Just as in *Okja*, management and organization studies has wished for children to be quiet, invisible, and outside, and their potential agency has been ignored.

This becomes particularly acute when we note that there obviously are organizations that are either run entirely by children, or where children are a majority. To the former group we might count for instance clubs or gangs that children establish, whereas the latter could include e.g. sports clubs for children or political organizations such as the former Komsomol in the Soviet Union. We might also consider companies that are dependent on large amounts of participating youngsters, such as for instance Kidzania, a chain of "interactive entertainment" centers where children can take on various adult jobs (such as postal worker, fire fighter, or journalist) in a simulated town with limited adult presence. And I've obviously not even mentioned major brands such as Disney or Lego, which are dependent on children as the final consumers. All these are easy to see, yet to all extents and purposes written out of management and organization theory.

In *Okja*, adults are by and large duplicitous and/or confused, be this due to confused professional identities such as in the case of the smarmy animal "expert" or due to more personal issues such as in the case of Mija's father. For instance, the latter attempts to console Mija after *Okja* has been taken away by giving her a solid gold pig, one with great monetary value, but is rebuked (possibly as accepting a monetary gift would also be an issue of transgressing the boundary between childhood and the market economy). It is as if adults have been sullied by living in the world of organizations, and in a sense carry a disease that shouldn't be transmitted to the young. I believe it is a version of this notion of the world of organization as a miasma (cf. Gabriel 2012) that has subconsciously affected the field of management and organization studies. One might argue that the reason we do not see children, is that we fear that whatever sickness unto death we've caught in our organizations might be contagious, and we marginalize so as not to sully the innocent.

THE KIDS STRIKE BACK

What is continuously forgotten in the conversation regarding children, organization, and management, is the notion that children may, in their own way, have agency. Granted, this agency is not necessarily identical with adult agency, as children have not necessarily established a clear identity-position from which to enact such, but still. The incapacity of management and organization studies to address and pay heed to children and childhood is, in an interesting fashion, an equivalent to how these relations are played out in movies such as *Okja*. In movies with child protagonists, and we might here think of classics such as *The Goonies* or *Annie*, the adult world is antagonistic but also fundamentally flawed. Children, for all their innate limitations, always do come out on top in these tales, as proof positive of the power of innocence and believing in miracles. No matter how superficially powerful adults are, children will win the day in the end.

In *Okja*, this plays out by way of Mija's unwavering faith and loyalty towards *Okja*. The love of a child has of course been a staple super-power in similar tales since time immemorial, but it is still important to note just how tales of children's opposition to the world of adults are geared to play out as morality tales. The assumed innocence of children is portrayed as both morally and functionally superior to the devalued and desecrated life-world of adults, to the point where we expect children to stand victorious, despite their many shortcomings. In *Okja*, Mija is presented as somewhat naïve, headstrong and careless. A child, in other words. Despite this, and despite the fact that she can be bamboozled, she is still a heroic figure,

able to do what crowds of determined adults are not. The weak shall lead the strong.

We can see something similar in the manner in which management and organization studies has ignored children. Whilst this has worked as a short-term strategy, the agency of children has a tendency to re-assert itself. Lego, the quintessential kid's company, has become a darling of management thinking. Apple is investing heavily in gaming and AR, and lest we forget, the success of games such as Angry Birds and Clash of Clans (just to mention the Finnish ones) have become a key part of their strategy. Social media valuations are increasingly dependent on whether they can attract young users, and the booming business in drones does owe a debt of gratitude to childhood dreams of free flight. Whilst the theorization of business has ignored childhood, practice has seen its importance grow exponentially – just ask Netflix.

Returning to the movie, this is referred to in numerous ways. No matter whether the adult organization is the Mirando corporation or the Animal Liberation Front (referred to as ALF, which shouldn't be confused with the author of this piece), the continuous theme of the movie is that adults will disregard, overlook, and generally not care about those who are not yet adults. Even adults portrayed as sympathetic, and sympathetic to Mija's cause and feelings in the matter, are played in a manner that distances them from childhood, and marginalizes the latter. Mija's father may have bought her a golden pig out of love, yet the notion that Okja could be replaced by an expensive trinket is immediately rejected by Mija as a typically adult logic.

The astute reader will by now have realized that *Okja* is at heart a critique of capitalism. It questions notions such as the power of corporations, the ethics of capitalism, and the notion that all things can be owned. This observation, whilst perfectly correct, is however also quite superficial. The trope of the evil corporation is by now standard in popular culture, and greedy capitalists (regardless of fashion-sense) are stock characters in many, many movies. What makes *Okja* somewhat more interesting than the usual notion of shadowy corporations and malfeasance hidden by conspiracies is that the corporate logic is openly acknowledged, has a grander mission (the breeding of the super-pigs of which Okja is one is done in order to create a more sustainable global food-system, and to lessen ecological strain), and is clearly portrayed as an adult logic, in contrast with the more innocent logic of Mija.

This, however, also opens for one additional critical turn in the reading of *Okja*, one in which the agency of children comes to the forefront. Disregarding the emotional bonds the movie established between its child protagonist and her super-pig, it is stated in no uncertain terms that the latter is in fact the creation and property of the Mirando corporation. Whilst the movie does point to various less than ethical behaviors on their part, the core mission of their project is at least potentially a beneficial one for the planet. In other words, Mija can also be read as the egoistical villain of the piece – a child that is prepared to put her own desires ahead of potentially saving tens of thousands of other children from starvation. In this sense, *Okja* might be read as an allegory of how those who criticize corporations may end up acting far more selfishly themselves. In such a reading, Mija is something akin to a millennial who protests corporate greed by ironically hashtagging the images they've taken with their iPhone X and put up on Instagram – feeling fully justified but failing to see the big picture.

Note, however, that such a reading, whilst less sympathetic towards our child protagonist, does not do away with the question of children's

agency. If anything, it highlights just how much agency children may have, and that they are well capable of taking a stand and acting upon the world of adults. Whilst children rarely have the capacities of Mija, they can still act upon corporations, through act such as sabotage, shoplifting and the likes (in effect doing what Mija does in *Okja*, but on a smaller scale), and while we might not wish to encourage such behavior, it exists and has its effects on the corporate world. Even without super-pigs.

PAYING ATTENTION TO CHILDHOOD

What these different readings of *Okja* can remind us of, then, is that children's agency and the interface between childhood and the corporate world remains a neglected area of inquiry in management and organization studies. Whilst a movie cannot show us the full gamut of ways in which children can and do affect organizations, it still serves as an important reminder of how we think about childhood and its relation to the adult world of corporations and the likes. Whilst we superficially might be watching an escapist story about a child standing up to a corporation, we may in fact be subjected to a more complex ideological move, one which both tries to reify and at the same time subvert the imagined barriers we've established between the two fields.

We can in this, and in the movie, see at least the following four movements:

1. *Separation*. Establishing that the world of childhood is fully separate from that of the world of organizations. This serves to bolster our common understanding of the fields as fundamentally different.

2. *Defilement*. Showing that one field entering into the other causes unpleasant, destructive effects (children being robbed, walls being shattered). This serves as a warning not to let the two fields come in too close a contact.

3. *New forms of agency*. Be it managers finding new ways of thinking when exposed to the world of children, or children finding new ways to act in the world of business, stories serve to highlight our subconscious belief that the might still, beyond the defilement (and we can here sense a theme of resurrection), be ways in which a meeting of the two fields can engender new dynamics.

4. *Re-establishing the separation*. Whilst much of what I've addressed here has to do with breaking boundaries, it is important to note that most tellings of children and corporations ends back up in a situation where the separation reigns anew. *Okja* is no different, ending with Mija and Okja back in the Eden-like existence in a forest untouched by the adult world. This represents the trauma we still have regarding children's agency and the potential of childhood, and permeates not only popular culture, but management and organization studies more generally.

In this sense, *Okja* is in no way a particularly radical or critical movie. On the contrary, it is primarily a fine example of how our society processes the trauma of children's agency. Whilst it does serve as a way to analyze our tendency to treat childhood, it also reifies our ways of marginalization and exclusion. In this sense, childhood gets co-opted in *Okja*, just as it often gets in our fields of study.

One might think what could be achieved if one was able to think more deeply about the second and the third movements as they are outlined above, and further if we did not engage in the fourth movement at all. The breaking of the barriers and rules of the adult world of organization might be understood as something more than mere tomfoolery, and the

attempts to not hear children's voices or pay attention to their agency could be read as something far darker than merely "let kids be kids". Further, the agency showcased by both fictional heroines such as Mija and actual ones like Malala Yousafzai (the youngest Nobel laureate to date, who used to be a child activist (until she grew up into an adult activist)) can be packaged as mere precociousness, but could also be studied as a different kind of agency, less beholden to the artificial separation between child- and adulthood.

Children can and do affect the world of adults, including the world of that most adult thing of all – the corporation, that super-organism not beholden to the biological cycle of births and deaths. We have ignored them in management and organization studies, simply because we prefer our theories less messy, less defiled, less complicated. Children are messy, ask the wrong kinds of questions, and exhibit agency that is not easily fit into notions of professional identities. Children organize in ways that are alien to our easy separations between management and work, plan and action, and the division of labor more generally. Whilst we tend to ignore all this by casting children merely as incomplete humans, enabling us to see their behaviors as proto-behaviors of adults, there is a more objective way to analyze the lifeworld of children, and movies such as *Okja* can serve as pedagogical tools in this.

As we, as a planet and a society, are moving towards a new form of demographical reality, one where our society is aging rapidly and where nativity is down across the board, management and organization studies must take stock of its various biases when it comes to age. Just like the elderly population are becoming impossible to ignore when thinking about the broader issues of society and economy, so does the field of childhood become one we need far less restricted understandings of. We need to be open to how children and childhood are parts of how the world – physical, social and organizational – is built. Wordsworth famously said that "child is the father of man". Management and organization studies have to realize that the same goes for organizations, possibly to the point where childhood becomes the progenitor of management.

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