

## DERISION AND MANAGEMENT

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## **DERISION AND MANAGEMENT**

### **Abstract**

While many studies have enlighten several rhetorical and linguistic structures of managerial discourses in organizations, few have analysed from a Lacanian standpoint the impact of these linguistic structures upon the subjectivity of the people concerned. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that many modern management techniques, resulting from the hybrid combination of communication and instrumental rationality paradigms, generate specific recurrent structures of languaging in organizations. These hybrid structures generate what I call here *homo managerialis* and are similar to the concept of *derision* as it has been expounded by Denis Vasse in a psychoanalytical context. Derision, in Vasse's psychoanalytical perspective, is a violent way to address to someone which starts with openness and ends up by closeness. It severs one's link with desire, confidence in life, makes work a pain, generates false sociability. This similarity between the structure of modern management techniques and derision is demonstrated through the analysis of three archetypal situations. Finally, based upon Vasse's specific post-Lacanian psychoanalytic anthropology which lends itself to the analysis of derision and from M. Henry's phenomenology of life, this paper will suggest a new understanding of human being and reason which is the basis for a new understanding of organizing which prevents derision.

### **Keywords**

Derision, language, violence, psychoanalysis, management, phenomenology of life.

### **Introduction**

"Thank you, have a safe journey. These are not the words of an airline employee addressing travellers leaving the airport but the mechanical sound issued by a parking machine, a machine which could not be less concerned with how pleasant, unpleasant, short or long a person's trip is. In this article I wish to use this modern device as a metaphor for certain managerial techniques whereby managers use falsely personal language when addressing their subordinates. I shall argue that the psychoanalytical concept of "derision" which has recently been developed by Denis Vasse (1999), using a Lacanian perspective, allows us to characterize the managerial linguistic structures where subjectivity is put at the forefront in a first step and then negated in a second step. This will allow me to identify, as far as the human subject is concerned the silent violence which occur in such managerial techniques.

In order to do this, I will first explain the concept of "derision", which is not a familiar term in the language/rhetoric of organizations, along

with several other concepts such as hypocrisy, irony, and insults. I will then show, based on Lacan's theory, how, through language, subjectivity emerges and how language distortions can affect subjectivity at a deep level. Subsequently, in order to explore Vasse's analysis of derision in further detail, I will need to show what distinguishes Vasse's specific approach from other Lacanians. Vasse's "open anthropology" (along this paper the word *anthropology* is used in its Kantian sense, i.e. knowledge about human beings) will be explored; an anthropology which, in connection with Michel Henry's phenomenology of life, underlines the intimate link between flesh and life. This is significant because according to Vasse, there is an intimate and unconscious link between speech, body and life; a link which is precisely reduced to silence by derision. Derisory language, says Vasse, undermines a person's faith in life.

The second part of my argument will consist in demonstrating that several modern management techniques generates specific recurrent structures of language which are similar to the concept of *derision* as it has been expounded by D. Vasse in a psychoanalytical context. I will then show the destructive impact of those managerial practices using the psychoanalytical understanding of derision and illustrating it with several common and archetypal situations in modern organizations.

Finally, based upon Vasse's specific psychoanalytic anthropology which lends itself to the analysis of derision and from M. Henry's phenomenology of life this paper will suggest a new understanding of human being and reason which is the basis for a new understanding of organizing which prevents derision.

### **I Understanding derision and its violence**

The particularity of the structure of derision is that, while it initially appears to encourage openness to the other and put the subject in the forefront, it ends up negating the other. Derision is "*[a discourse] which cannot withstand the very notion of difference and, by extension, of otherness*" (Vasse, 1999:99). While many studies have enlighten several rhetorical and linguistic structures of managerial discourses in organizations, few have analysed from a Lacanian standpoint the impact of these linguistic structures upon the subjectivity of the people concerned.

#### **Derision among organizational rhetoric**

Søderberg and Björkman (Vaara and Søderberg Eds, 2003) describe how managers working on the definition of new values during a merger, ask each employee to think about and express their opinions on these values. But the process was not really designed to stimulate open dialogue. The authors mention the feelings of confusion and offence resulting from what could appear at first glance as an

*hypocrisy*. Hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1985) is the kind of speech management uses when faced with contradictory constraints. As an example, Waldo (1977), has elicited the contradiction between bureaucracy and democracy which leads to the manipulation of communication. And yet hypocrisy do not sufficiently highlight the move from openness to closure in communication. In French, the expression « *être tourné en dérision* » clearly expresses the transformation of subjective openness into aggressive action - “turned against” someone. In this sense, the concept of hypocrisy silences the violence which can be heard through derision.

Derision, however, is distinct from *mockery* and *sarcasm* (Gabriel, 1998) in the sense that these kinds of language are explicitly aggressive and do not begin with a phase of openness. Derision also differs from impersonal bureaucratic language (Baum, 1987), in that *bureaucratic language*, in its weberian form never claims to be personal. Derision should also be distinguished from *irony*: according to Rorty (1989), irony is the ability to deal with practical and ethical ambivalence by conveying to a compliant listener a meaning that is contrary to what was expected. Dent (2003) has illustrated how irony contains tensions and conflicts between management and medical staff introducing the possibility of innovation and creates a momentary rupture in the socially constructed discourse.

Among the many forms of violence in organizations, derision is one of the forms of violence using language: other such forms include double bind (Bateson, 1973) and tangential answer (Laing, 1961), soft violence where words hide considerable constraints (Courpasson, 2000); symbolic violence where words are used to exclude (Bourdieu, 1991); harsh language when the perverse person harasses and bullies others (Ashforth, 1994; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Hirigoyen, 1999; to name but a few); operational, abstract, and objective language which denies actual experience (Bouchard, 1990; Stein, 2001).

Humour helps the subject come to terms with the pain of losing an object; above all, it helps him put things in perspective and focus on what is essential – the joy of being alive. According to Freud (1905), witticism stems from the unconscious life, and makes a distinction between the living subject and its objects. Conversely, derision causes one to laugh not at the situation but at the subject. Consequently, of the many ways of attacking the act of speech (censorship, lies, denial, insult etc) derision is one of the most destructive and violent.

### **From violent rhetorics to Lacanian approaches**

Ongoing linguistic studies have examined organizational language from several different angles but very few have made the link between language, body and the subject's experience of life

(Westwood and Linstead, 2001). According to Linstead, a first line of research goes beyond the simplistic positivist view that language is a carrier of meaning and, relying upon several sources (Schutz, Gadamer), sees language as central in the process of constructing social reality and identities. A second line proceeding from structuralism, deconstruction and post-modernism asserts that “language is organization and organization is language” (Linstead, 2001:16). This approach raises issues of order, power and resistance, of knowledge and power, identity and boundaries, rationality, control and objectivism.

According to Linstead quoting Derrida, language has lost “life and warmth” and future works integrating body and language are necessary to deal with organizational violence and to create “a language of organization that is more subtle, *more alive and less brutal than the forms we currently work within*” (2001:344) I underline. This is why it strikes me as particularly relevant to refer to Vasse’s psychoanalytical exposition, which, after Lacan, articulates life, speech, body in a specific way. According to Lacan (1966) the *unconscious is structured as a language* and any distortion of language affects the subject at the unconscious level. In organization science, several authors have studied the forms of violence using language from a psychoanalytical standpoint: language of figures which leads to devastating decisions (Allcorn, Baum, Diamond, Stein, 1996;); political language which renders managers blameless (Mason and Carr, 1999); managerial language shaped by economic stereotypes (Dejours, 1998); politically correct language which leads to organizational nihilism and to the destruction of language (Schwartz, 2002). But few authors have shown, using Lacan, the psychic suffering generated by some narrative structure. S. Vanheule, A. Lievrouw and P. Verhaeghe (2003) demonstrate the links between imaginary orientation in language and burnout. Next, in order to get a specific Lacanian understanding of the psychic violence of derision generated by some management techniques, we must make a small detour through Lacan and Vasse’s approaches to the basic conditions of emergence of the subject through speech.

### **From Lacanian anthropology to a psychoanalytical understanding of derision**

#### *From the imaginary to the symbolic, Lacan’s primary concept*

Before exploring Vasse’s concept of derision, we must first briefly recall Lacanian anthropology. In 1936, while dealing with psychosis, Lacan introduced his first discovery: the “mirror stage”. The mirror stage allows the young child to link his “own body” with the image he sees in the mirror. He identifies with an image, literally, he is in the *imaginary* orientation. But this identification is still a *dual* relationship (a relation reduced to two terms) and the child, having no distance from his/her image, is alienated by it: this is what Lacan calls a true

“narcissistic grip“ (1966). This underlines the importance of the Oedipal phase which follows and where a Father intervenes: by talking to the child, the father prevents him from being in a dual relationship with his mother, a relationship in which he tries to be the unique object of her *jouissance* (imaginary orientation). From a Lacanian perspective, by writing Father with a capital letter, I underline the symbolic function at play. According to Lacan, the “*nom du père*” is the function which symbolically refers the child to the law and to Other’s desire. This does not designate the image or the action of the person who incarnates the father. Seeing the Father at a symbolic level, it could be the mother, a teacher, etc (following *Ecrits*, 1966, p. 278).

Thus the Father’s law opens the subject to a fundamental lack, a lack, the child will be able to deal with by articulating a request and thus identifying himself with the Father, not as an image but as the one who speaks, as a “*parlêtre*” – (condensation of French *être de parole*, or “being of speech” – Lacan, 1966). He is thus introduced to the *symbolic* order of speech, order of signifiers. Simultaneously, the Father’s law forbidding the child to identify with an image (and later with an organization), allows him to live as a subject distinct from other subjects (his father, his mother, etc), and thus, opens him up to the dimension of difference. His *parlêtre* identity does not come from his identification with an image but from his openness to otherness mediated by the Other’s desire and speech (it is essential here to point out the dual sense of Lacan’s *désir de l’Autre* – i.e. both desire *for* and *by* the Other). This, from a Lacanian perspective, indicates the subjective opening to the dimension of the *Real* where the other is not objectified but acknowledged as another subject. All this subjective development is put into difficulty when Father’s speech signifying chain is distorted, lack or is perverted, then the subject is stuck in the narcissistic imaginary orientation. J. Roberts (2001) argues, referring to Lacan, how in organization governance the narcissistic concerns are reinforced and bound to ethically indifferent financial concerns

#### From Lacan to Vasse

One Lacanian trend identifies “the desire for/by the Other” as a chain of signifiers grounded in the locus of the unconscious: the subject is a *structural position within a configuration of signifiers*. Consequently, they underline the subjection and the loss in terms of subjectivity which language implies. This is perfectly coherent with post-modern views which claim that language, in an endless circularity opens to representations, to a web of linguistic relationship. Derrida and Foucault, Linstead points out, “do not offer an escape from the ‘prison house of language’” (2001: 335). Vasse’s argument/theory is different from this Lacanian trend and takes a very original stance in the field of contemporary thought. Indeed, Vasse was a member of the

*Ecole Freudienne de Paris* and has published several books in Lacan's *La chose freudienne* collection published by Seuil. But Vasse's novelty lies in the way he illustrates the link between flesh, life and speech. This in itself is both very interesting and very problematic, for such a theory is very rare in Western thought. Vasse's anthropology, which is based on Lacan's theories, converges with Michel Henry's phenomenology of life (1998) and articulates the link between flesh, signifiers and life.

#### Connecting speech, body and life

Reporting on Coralie's analysis, Vasse (1974) pinpoints the precise moment where the move from imaginary to symbolic occurs. It happens when the child perceives herself, with joy, as a subject when she makes the connection between the image she sees and the analyst's (in the father's position) voice she hears speaking her name "Coralie". Vasse says that the "act of speech", of naming her, brought together the different parts of the images (eye, mouth, hair, etc) she saw and associated the visible image with the invisible unique subject (Vasse, 1974). When the child hears a subjective address in the tone of his Father's voice (with its effect felt by the body), it's not only the opening to the Other's desire which is established but also *the unconscious and symbolic link between the named subject and life* (Vasse, 1974, 1999). The child can now acknowledge, through joy, the experience of life revealing itself in her flesh. Then, the subject's faith in life is restored, she gains confidence in life and, the door of the prison of her ego being open she becomes "One Among Others" (Vasse, 1978). Now that this unconscious link with life has been restored he/she can face difficulties with confidence - although this does not mean she will not suffer. This means that the subject no longer needs to reinforce her self with narcissistic images such as the power of an organization but draws her subjective confidence from the intimate incarnated link she has with life. This allows Vasse to specify Lacan's topology (Imaginary, Symbolic and Real) in relation to life.

"If human being consents to the Other of unconscious desire...the Symbol founds human being in the original articulation between Real and Imaginary... Real... only gives itself to be thought of as Life... Real lives in a perpetual act of revelation...which is *Truth which speaks*" (1999 : 192).

#### **The violence of Derision according to Vasse's Anthropology**

It is now possible to explore the relationship between derision and the psychic structure. According to Vasse, the process of derision begins precisely when parents speak about the baby and his functional needs, but don't speak to the baby as a subject. This is an objectifying or functional language, in which he is named through a "he/she" which does not call for his own speech. Vasse underlines the violence of this impersonal, operative language used by parents and which keeps the young child in the imaginary orientation instead of

introducing him to the symbolic dimension: here the Father's words fail to free the child from the narcissistic identification. This stops the unconscious process of openness to Real, or in Vasse's words to incarnated life. Derisory language masks, beneath the weight of words, the refusal to give or take the word. As a result, language loses its symbolic dimension, it becomes meaningless rhetoric.

Then, being unable to experience the joy of being a living incarnated subject related to others, he/she will look for the *jouissance* of his/her drives, *jouissance* that he will find playing with the other's words. Plunged into a narcissistic identification, he is unable to acknowledge the Other whom he sees as an idol or a rival. According to Lacan, he/she is in the violence of a dual relationship (to possess or to be possessed; to be omnipotent or impotent). He will snigger at the other's words and refuse the words which are spoken to him. Furthermore, in this closed structure (imaginary), Vasse explains that the subject is then reduced to an ego which objectifies herself and others (desubjectivation), thus repeating the incestuous quest for the primordial object: the mother.

"The *ego* seeks its identity in the pleasures of the senses and in the satisfaction of being the other's object or turning them into an object(...) This imaginary relationship leads the *ego* to identify with the object of its urges (partial object), which is precisely what is forbidden by speech". (1999: 62,63).

This objectification of the other is the starting point of perversion: the pervert uses and abuses others. He uses them as objects to satisfy his urges. He thinks purely in terms of submission and oppression. Furthermore, Vasse says: "*nobody uses the law to get what he wants quite like the pervert*" (Vasse:1999: 293). This perversion following derision will manifest itself in professional situations. Vasse illustrates this using the example of Citizen Kane: Kane, by laying out money, wants to turn the voice of the opera singer he adulates into a "goldmine". Kane's mother actually was the owner of a goldmine! This same mother injured him by deciding, without his consent and while his father failed to intervene, that he would be educated by a banker. Then he was plunged into the imaginary order. Let us dwell upon the power of the unconscious signifier "goldmine" in this imaginary order where there is no speech.

## **II Derision and Management**

### **How modern management generates derision and *homo managerialis*?**

How is it possible to transfer the concept of derision from psychoanalysis to a corporate context? The first step is to notice that since Wiener (1948) and post world war II ideology of communication, the paradigm of communication is naturalised in modern management. Communication is part of manager's skill and seems to

be the way of openness to the other. But, Lacan (1966) underlines that communicating does not, de facto, indicate the subject's participation in the symbolic order. As a part of modern communication, Lacan says, the subject becomes caught up in stereotypes: if his words reflect his identification with - or the introjection of - social or organizational objectifying categories, then *"the wall of language opposes speech"* (1966 : 282) and the subject remains in an imaginary orientation.

On the other hand, to manage, in the sense of scientific management, means to adopt instrumental rationality (Weber, 1968) following the abstract and anonymous scientific paradigm inherited from physics. In the expansion of modern rationality and technology language is there reduced to information (Heidegger, 1982). Therefore we will observe how scientific management techniques are a source of derision in that they are based upon a paradigm of addressing the subject which seems to encourage openness (communication) but which in actual fact, based on instrumental rationality, they close subjectivity: in that *they are issued from an hybrid combination of contradictory paradigms*. Consider, as an illustration of this, Simon's (1978) anonymous information processing model, and its critics (Dery, 1990; Kilduff, 1993; Gabriel, 1998; to name but a few). Following such an hybrid paradigm, management means to drive collective action in a very specific way which consists in talking to people in order to:

- 1) look, measure, classify, and quantify actions, things and people through abstract and theoretical categories (an imaginary in the Lacanian sense) in order to establish models, rules, objectives or standardised procedures (phase A);
- 2) organize, including, if necessary, constrained empowerment (with threats and rewards); and then after establish assessments of the organization from the abstract reductive, objectifying models, objectives, rules or procedures (phase B);
- 3) control, rectify, or punish and sometimes excluding whatever does not comply with the abstract, objectified grid, the managerial imaginary, (phase C).

This is the basis of a number of managerial techniques such as BPR, benchmarking, downsizing, outsourcing, etc. In such a context, rational language helps the organization to run smoothly, but, as Lacan has already observed, it does not help the subject to speak: *"The more functional language becomes, the more unsuited it is for speech..."* (Lacan: 1966:180). In his book *La derision et la joie*, Vasse points out managerial language as a starting point for derision: *"the dominant discourse of an objectifying (more than objective) efficiency – of speed and money – ... eliminates the dimension of the otherness of a speaking body"* (Vasse, 1999 : 90).

In this hybrid combination of apparently contradictory paradigms: communication and instrumental rationality, lies the very essence of the problem I wish to deal with in this article. Modern management appears as a generative structure of a specific way of languaging, a generative structure of contradictory chain of signifiers.

As a matter of fact, when due care is not taken, a number of managerial techniques which are based on these paradigms bear, as far as the subject is concerned, striking similarities to the structure of derision. At first, they seem to seek the subject's subjectivity by asking him/her to speak in order to provide information which will be processed to establish a norm, an administrative or standardized procedure, a new organization (phase A). But they negate the subjectivity by forcing the subject to speak only according to the requirements of the efficient running of the organization in mind (speed, productivity,...), and not the subject's actual context. If there is empowerment, this is a constrained empowerment. Secondly, during phase B, they seem to be open by interviewing the subject about his work, as a subject, but they further negate this subjectivity by establishing a neutral, objective assessment of the subject according to these norms, models or procedures and not according to the subjective dimension of his work. Thirdly, during phase C, they may end up negating the subject by punishing or excluding him if he has not followed the objectified procedure or reached the objectives. But they will announce this exclusion, through many euphemism, as a salvation. This will be illustrated along the empirical part of this article.

The kind of relationship generated by such managerial techniques appear to be the source of real suffering resulting from the perversion of treating the other like an object (Alveson and Willmott, 1992; Long, 2002, to name but a few), after addressing him as a subject. *This is precisely what I call managerial derision.* This structure of managerial derision generates (or is coherent) with the attitude to language and speech of an archetypal being that I call *Homo managerialis*. *Homo managerialis* appears to us a being who communicates, feign openness, but is constrained, by his narcissistic identification to instrumental rationality and objectives, to closeness through abstract modelling, objectivation of the other and selectivity. Thus *Homo managerialis* is constrained to (or is comfortable with) derision. This, of course, in the real life, can be reinforced or attenuated by manager's personal attitude toward speech and language, their narcissistic identification or distance towards organizational goals, and by their ability to negotiate objectives coming from above in relation to the context of real life. On the side of people suffering from derision, as psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with the structure of early childhood trauma, we will have to determine whether derision in organizations recalls an initial trauma (reactivated derision) or whether the subject suffers from its intrinsic characteristics

(professional derision generated by the contradictory structure of managerial language).

### **Methodology for obtaining insights about the derisive effects of managerial techniques**

What I propose now is to draw a parallel between managerial techniques where the human subject is caught in an opening/closing dialogue structure (assessments, quality standardization, audits, etc) and the results of Vasse's clinical work. I will present three common archetypal situations which were related to me by interviewees after I had explained to them the main characteristics of derision. These situations are very common and can be found everywhere in modern organizations. By identifying in these situations the structural similarities between these managerial techniques and derision – for both consist in pushing the subject to the forefront and subsequently negating it – I will show how these management techniques and practices cause the human subject to suffer.

### **Effects of derision: elimination of desire through standardisation and pressure**

Derision occurs in managerial techniques such as quality standardisation procedures, when people are asked to speak a lot in order to explain everything beforehand (what I named phase A previously). This is an interesting opening to speech compared to Taylorism. But the closure comes just after when the subject must restrict himself to doing what he/she said and what has been written down, objectified in the imaginary order, which allows no room for discussion. Such managerial techniques overlook the fact that reality differs from any imaginary plan or procedure. Particularly, they ignore that in the make-to-order manufacturing workers discusses singular situations with other people (symbolic dimension) and finds a solution which is suitable for that particular problem. The fact that it is deemed necessary to arrange audits to check that things are done by the book, rather than to check that things are done appropriately in a given situation, is proof of violence and belittlement. Vasse defines the kind of violence which is generated by such techniques thus:

“The hidden violence in derision always tries to reduce the speaking subject– the speaking-being – to a spoken subject, to an ego staged in the discourse (...) Thus truthful speech – or the speaking truth – is cancelled out.” (1999:108).

In the following interview issued from Delobel et al. (1993), I wish to illustrate how such a structure can be found in quality standardization procedures:

*Foreman: We are currently working towards ISO 9002 certification, which means that all procedures have to be formalized and written down. We have to say everything we do, write down everything we say, and improve on everything that's written down. Once we are issued ISO certification by an*

*independent body, we can prove to our clients that we master all the operations and processes... communication must be clear, there must be no ambiguity (operative language). This will enable to focus all our energy on fulfilling our commitments to the clients (pressure). But you must realize the amount of work this entails: everything has to be clarified, the Quality department wants to write everything down, so we'll have to explain everything to them, which won't always be easy. They want to know everything; it's as if they were getting their own back. Also, the Quality Department wants to change its name to Control and Accuracy, but we're not happy about that in Production – it belittles us.*

This man expresses his feeling of being imprisoned in a grid of words he can't escape. Vasse illustrates this in his clinical work:

*"See how a person condemned to a life of forced labour can get caught up, imprisoned in the grind by a series of words: 'In my head, it's squared: there's a grid and I get stuck. If I go by the grid, I manage to find my way; but if I stay outside the grid, I'm lost(...) I'm a prisoner of words and meanings, I'm closed in by them(...) I never have a moment's peace(...) I'm always under pressure(...) I never have a moment's rest.' (Vasse 1999:106).*

*Foreman (cont'd): Several of my workers say that the job isn't what it used to be, that they no longer take pleasure in doing a job well (elimination of desire). All that matters now is the result. It doesn't matter if we do a crappy job: as long as the quality standards are maintained, we're all right. Our job is to comply with the standards – the product isn't important anymore (standardization, complying with the grid, with an abstraction). We used to have a good relationship with our co-workers; now we don't see our friends anymore, we never have time to chat, we don't meet up by the coffee machine as often as we used to (desire is eliminated). You have to be the right man, in the right place at the right time... This system actually isolates people.*

If due care is not taken, standardization techniques isolate human beings. These techniques put people under pressure (control), increase productivity and make sure there is no room for time-wasting - no intersubjective space. When *"words are dissociated from their source and from their effects they turn the human subject away from the truth of the desire from and for the Other."* Vasse says (1999:96). Thus, with desire for the Other and link with life eliminated, work loses its value as a mediation of lively intersubjective encounters. In such cases, people often demonstrate individualistic behaviour and become extremely competitive with one another. When desire is eliminated work becomes a painful constraint, a chore: *"derision always uses the question of anal fixation to a greater or lesser extent."* adds Vasse (1999:114). Being alive means carrying out a

particular task in a given situation, not complying with the abstraction of standards. In such situations Vasse calls for a law which denounces this enclosure (Vasse 1999: 105). In such case, it is possible to lay down a rule that says that whenever a worker feels he's doing a "crappy job" when carrying out a standardized task, he is allowed to break away from the standards, provided he can discuss it in an appropriate forum.

### **Derision, Objectivation and Loss of Faith in Life**

Some managerial techniques treat the subject with derision when they call upon the subject's speech through a series of meetings with auditors, consultants and the like, but keep to rational or instrumental views (see Søderberg and al. already quoted). This can also be a neutral, objective assessment of the subject according to abstract, imaginary criteria (what I previously called phase B). Here, an interview with a head of a factory about the ranking of one of his foremen. This foreman spoke several times with an auditor. But, reduced to being the object of a rigorous assessment, received the results in the post without being offered the possibility to talk about this assessment with the Human Resources Manager:

*(Head of factory:) One day, one of my young foremen came into work completely deflated. He told me he was disappointed, that after several interviews with the assessment auditor he'd hoped to be given a N6 ranking but only got N5. With the coefficient on his pay slip, he should have been at least N6, and wondered why he had been relegated. Was it a way of saying "keep your nose clean, or else you'll be for it," as his wife had suggested? After all, another foreman in the factory had just been dismissed for "disloyal behaviour".*

*The result was sent to him in an envelope marked 'confidential.' When giving his assessment, the Human Resources Manager talked about him in the third person, but it wasn't a form of politeness or deference: the employee was the object of a rigorous scientific procedure.*

*Having been degraded – in every sense of the word – by the results of his assessment, my foreman was worried about what fate Management had in store for him. He could feel the threat of dismissal looming over him day and night; he was physically sick at home, literally nauseated and offended by what was happening at work. Was the tenuous link between him and his company finally broken? Should he consider leaving? More than anything, he dreaded facing his workers: he said he'd lost face, that he felt he was no longer valid. How could he feel good about himself, if they didn't look up to him anymore? Everywhere he looked he saw warning signs; he was afraid. But I listened to him and he regained confidence; he said he could finally see a light at the end of the tunnel.*

In this technical environment the disorientated subject thinks he will build up his assurance in the objectivity of assessment procedures. However, whereas it is true that the desire for a fair assessment is perfectly legitimate, in the case of this foreman, the subject made the mistake of making his confidence in life dependent on the image (imaginary order) which an objectifying process might give him. In this case, the subject believes that his assessment is a reflection of his identity, that the image his assessment creates *is* him, and thus is projected into a narcissistic orientation. Such a dependence of young professionals upon company assessments has been examined by Pagès et al. (1979: 149) and Schwartz (1990). These authors have shown how a newcomer, plunged into an infantile regression, will react when faced with a large organization: he/she is tempted to reinforce her self-confidence, by introjecting the “organization-ideal”. According to Vasse, such a quest for “self-confidence” is misleading as it is unaware of the truth of the embodied life: *“Man’s assurance derives from the life that speaks within him, not from his image...”* (1999:166).

The fact that this process ends up without any true speech means that the subject is deprived of the symbolic dimension. Speech is reduced to information: he receives the results of the analysis by mail. In this type of scenario, the words are no longer words spoken by one subject (I) to another (you), face to face; nor are they spoken in a human voice, a presence which can inspire trust and an intersubjective desire. Without a presence – opening to the dimension of the Real – the signifiers (written words) set off exaggeratedly alarm bells in the subject’s imaginary who, unable to lean upon confidence in life, is seized by a death drive, and conjures up the unspoken phrase: *“keep your nose clean”*. Thus, more than feeling offended, sickened and afraid he falls prey to exclusion fantasies and a desire to fade away: *“When a person is a victim of derision, the Other’s desire is turned into a ‘rejection-refusal’ of himself,”* as Vasse says (1999:146). If there is no room in this process for subjective and intersubjective speech - however conflicting it may be - the organization projects the subject into a narcissistic assessment mechanism where the subject turns against himself the force of desire, denigrating himself (rejection-refusal) instead of establishing confidence in his unconscious incarnated link with life.

It is interesting to compare the psychic suffering of this young foreman with the words of one of Vasse’s patients. These words express the violent effects on a person who experienced derision in her early childhood when her mother, using anonymous and impersonal language, gave her a “new father” without telling her the truth.

“Whenever my friends were talking, all I could hear was: you’re nothing! Complete derision, you’re nothing. It negates life, your faith

in life(...) There's no truth anymore, and instead of truth there's sniggering, everything is ridiculed. It destroys all my trust in them(...) It's horrible, I want to disappear, it's unbearable(...) It's as if, all of a sudden, deceit had got the better of truth(...) As if all my trust in life were shattered, destroyed in one fell swoop." (1999 : 101).

This patient says that faced with immense derision, she experiences a negation of her subjectivity, a feeling of worthlessness, an overwhelming sense of deceit which means that she is unable to trust other people, words, or life itself. Her words reveal a strong death drive ("I want to disappear"). She experiences fear and distrust of her friends' words (whether these words are friendly or not), and had built her identity upon the trauma of this initial derision. In this case derision is "massive" and can rekindle the pain of the initial trauma at any time and place, often without any reason. This must, of course, be distinguished from less destructive forms of derision which occur later in life - the corporate appraisal situation, for example - but it does illustrate the kind of pain derision can lead to.

### **Derision as False Sociability and Violence of Exclusion through Shock (stupefaction)**

The derision process through managerial techniques ends up negating the subject by punishing or excluding him if he has not reached the objectives or followed the objectified procedure (what I previously called phase C). This illustrates another aspect of the structure of derision which consists in feigning openness to Otherness, only but to deny it afterwards. Derision "*subjects the one it claims to address, to the pure logic of a contradictory and closed discourse*" (Vasse, 1999: 105). According to Vasse, derision is the weapon of the perverse mind, a way of masking oneself behind a facade of friendliness. As one of Vasse's patients said:

"The more violent I feel, the more I tend to express it through an exaggerated display of politeness – that's what violence is (...) I experience a kind of cold satisfaction; it's a way of controlling my hatred."(Vasse 1999:122).

Here we can see a split between an apparent openness for the benefit of social situations, and the subject who is closed in by managerial objectives and withdraws into himself. Following this perverse logic, the manager asks questions without waiting for an answer. Otherness and difference are negated: "*Derision strips all differences of their symbolic function*" (1999:117), says Vasse. We can observe a similar pattern when *homo managerialis* on an efficiency drive and following the communication methods and models currently in fashion, asks for certain information but doesn't want to hear anything that surprises him, anything that comes from the Otherness of the speaking subject:

*“Having listened to my suggestions, the boss replied immediately and with vehemence: it’s self-absorbed, it’s an invitation to conduct endless discussion. It’s too simple, it won’t come to anything, it’s a waste of time. We must act, we can’t afford to waste time on pointless discussions.”*

Trained in communication techniques whereby the sole purpose is to convey a message effectively or to enhance an image, homo managerialis displays a semblance of communicativeness; he tries to reassure his listeners. And yet behind this facade of openness, he uses other words and techniques which drive his imaginary, without being able to open up to the Other during an encounter. The following interview strikes me as particularly revealing.

*A colleague of mine in Marketing told me that once, just before the holidays, his department was called for a special meeting with Management. The Director told them while consulting his notes that he had decided to reassign their head of department and to have an audit. He said: ‘I made this decision because I want to save your department (words of reassurance, an open, friendly image). Under the circumstances, I could have taken far more drastic measures (threats). I want to fight for the future of your department (words of reassurance, seduction). I decided to reassign the head of your department because we don’t share the same ideas about what his role should be. His idea of a head of department is someone who defends their team, whereas what he should be doing is carrying out the decisions made by Management (negation of a possible otherness). The Assistant Manager will fill in for the meantime (closure).*

*My colleague said that he had felt relieved at hearing this news (despite the news of the reassignment, he thought that Management was going to keep his department). However, the Director went on: the Assistant Manager will do an audit; he will look into the situation, take stock, have a sift through and see where a cutback can be made. (Violence after the initial friendliness). It’s not an easy task, but we have to be brave and just do it. (Modern and widespread idea of a violent and risk-free so-called courage). We have to increase our margins, competition is tough...(thinly veiled threat of downsizing).*

*So at that point my colleague thought: I must say something, or I’m dead. So he made a few points about his department’s activities, to which the Director replied: your job is to cooperate, cooperate, cooperate... My colleague was disappointed as he felt he hadn’t managed to get his point across. After the meeting, everyone was stunned: they couldn’t see or imagine any way out of the situation (shock). My colleague blamed himself for not having spoken up in favour of their head of department.*

This announcement of a rescue by audit, with its focus on cost-cutting, demonstrates how this manager's mind is utterly taken up by management thought patterns – to the extent that he refuses to listen to his inner voice (in the name of courage). This announcement, with its openness and closure, is typical of the derision inherent in certain types of management language. Subjected to such derision, the subjects can no longer speak as subjects (open to the Other's desire, to in a symbolic context where difference can be expressed), and so they remain silent or utter insignificant sentences. Derision "*prevents speech from taking shape in the flesh, or prevents the flesh from speaking, which amounts to the same thing.*" Vasse says (1999: 96). Then, subjects are in danger of falling into the trap of identifying with the attacker (imaginary orientation).

Meanwhile, homo managerialis, imprisoned by derision, develops a split personality and can no longer recognize the difference, the Otherness of the other. He is permanently in conflict with others and cannot stand being questioned or contradicted. As Vasse points out:

Despite his appearance he's not listening...his reasoning is perfectly clear to him: he strips the difference of its substance. He turns it into a dual opposition, clearly contradictory and perverse. In doing so he excludes or eliminates his partner – but not without pitying him, and almost always for his salvation!" (1999: 118, 119)

### **III Discussion: from managerial derision to openness**

#### **With people who suffer from managerial derision**

Derision in organization, being an attack on incarnated speech, is an attack on desire and on subjectivity. This is a symbolic form of violence in that it attacks the symbolic link which unifies, flesh, life and speech: it is a constant source of suffering. However, according to Vasse a person who is a victim of derision should not think of revolting against it as *the* solution, as the ultimate horizon. If we revolt against derision we cannot be part of the truth of desire which is life's link between human beings; a link which emerges through meaningful dialogue.

Derision in organizations has a similar structure and generates the same fantasies and attitudes as derision in early childhood. However, it is important to distinguish two degrees of derision: on the one hand there are those subjects who maintain their faith in life, and can talk about the derision they experience with a person they trust. They will suffer from derision but after a while, and after some meaningful dialogue, they will be able to recover (as in the case of the young foremen described earlier). On the other hand, there are those people who have suffered from derision since their childhood and are put in a situation which reactivates the same suffering they experienced in childhood. Once again, these people will resort to revolt or despair and will have, as far the unconscious is concerned, great difficulty in establishing meaningful dialogue with their loved ones.

Vasse says that a person who is subjected to derision will feel better if he/she has someone to confide in, someone (generally outside the organization) who will listen to him with gentleness and compassion: “*gentleness, compassion and acceptance of the truth of desire will help to detonate the mine of derision.*” (1999:105). This kind of listening is not a Rogerian one with its mirror effect: listening to him has an interpretative value in the sense that the subject cannot then pretend to be rejected. He is now on the way to reconciling himself with the truth of the desire that introduces him to “the gift of life” he has been granted since the beginning. According to Vasse, if the subject is listened to, “full speech”, interpretative words, similarly to the Father’s words, can break down the barrier of the signifier (i.e. goldmine) and open up to the “I am” with its profound connection to life.

According to Vasse, in both cases of derision, the subject’s recovering from derision can be observed while he/she is resting – that is the moment when he/she relinquishes his imaginary search for identity and rests in the Other’s desire, gift of life (note the French word for to rest *reposer*, or *re-place*). Thus, the subject at work in organizations can come to realize that his identity does not derive from his images; that being a subject does not mean being manipulated into a model of operational efficiency – or being a manipulator.

### **Preventing derision in organizations**

#### *From Homo managerialis to an open anthropology*

By arguing the symbolic violence of derision through certain managerial techniques, this paper is not only attempting to recommend an ethic of communication in organizations implicitly calls for due care with speech when addressing certain delicate situations or vulnerable people. The issues this paper raises are more fundamental: faced to *homo managerialis* and his attitude towards language and speech, it introduces a renewed open anthropology (even an ontology), that of a subject open to the Other’s desire, to the symbolic order and to living flesh. This perspective is an answer to Linstead’s request for new links between language and body in organizational science and is consistent with his quoting Gendlin that flesh is beyond language. What makes it stand out among the many approaches of subjectivity in current Western thought and in the context of organizations is the way it identifies the subjectivity at a very fundamental level: the gift of life which speaks in subject’s flesh and which empowers him to say “I,” and to answer. This subject, intimately linked to life, is not a modern omnipotent ego nor the post-modern being subjected to the many flows of signifiers and discourse.

The specific but difficult point raised by this anthropology is its reference to the theme of life. Vasse's perspective nevertheless converges with Michel Henry's phenomenology of life. Henry recalls that Schopenhauer was the first to introduce - in *The World As Will and Representation* (1818; 1995) - the theme of life on the European scene. Schopenhauer rejects classical thought and opposes the "will for life" to the world of representation. Henry underlines that with such a perspective which had deeply influenced European culture up until 1930, the subject disappears in the flow of life. Henry criticises this view where there is no connection between life and subjectivity. When life is not connected to subjectivity it becomes an anonymous, blind force, a force which was represented on a mass scale by Nazi brutality and barbarian rationality. On the contrary, we have seen that naming the child, the Father, makes alive the link between the subject, flesh and life. In this sense life is never an anonymous flow but, each time, someone's life, someone identified by his name. And yet this intimate link with life, experienced through the flesh and opening to speech and the symbolic order, is what different humans being have in common. In this sense, opening to the body is not what could be felt in a modern perspective as a "monstrous opening" (Linstead, 2001:329). Incarnated life shared by differentiated human beings is a possible living foundation of the social link, a link that is different from the market, the mob, from social contract in the modern world of individuals and from transcendence in the pre-modern world.

*Toward a new understanding of reason and a new subjective orientation to the others and things while organizing*

Moreover, going a step further in this post-Lacanian perspective, we can suggest that once open to subjectively incarnated life, the manager is not imprisoned in the imaginary stance of the organization, and is no longer dependant on the image he must project but is open to desire for the Other. Being opened to the symbolic dimension, this subject does not develop imaginary representations of the other, he does not take the other as an object of his will following the organisational context and flows. On the contrary, she/he is open to the truth of desire and is able to deal and speak with the other as another subject and to avoid derision and objectification. Consequently, he is also able to deal with objects as objects (and to avoid mimetism) within the symbolic relationship established with others. This leads to the specific recommendation that a person, in a managerial position, should, while consenting to the division of the subject, accede to the life which speaks through his/her flesh when encountering another. This requires suspending the rationality of imaginary organizational goals - which that is possible with what Lacan calls the fundamental lack. This is the way to address people and situations in a more lively way with words: it opens up the possibility of speaking as a subject while working in an organizational context.

This new focus illustrates that, according to Henry, life is not at the service of a will based on imaginary representations, nor is it at the service of goals defined by human rationality (in the sense of H. Simon, 1972), but incarnated life is Reason which, at a deep, symbolic level, indicates a person's attitude toward others and towards objects. This happens before any reasoning: the many good men who saved other peoples' life during World War II claim that the only reason they did so was that no other choice was possible for them. Thus life is at the foundation of living beings' ethics. Further research should ascertain how this reasonable subject, which is not relying upon his image but upon his intimate incarnated link with life, is able to take the risk of challenging the goals and procedures of organizations through meaningful dialogue. It could, for example, elicit how this silent link with life can account for "whistle blowing" in organizations.

*Towards new attitudes to managerial techniques*

It is possible here to make certain indications as a way of lifting the heavy burden with which I have saddled myself by linking derision to Western hybrid combination of rationality instrumental rationality and communication. The subject who manages and who is open to living flesh does not identify with a representation and is consequently not trapped in the categories which represent situations and actions. He/she has the deep-rooted attachment which enables him/her to escape the imaginary grid of words and existing categories, to stand not knowing, to listen and live with people before categorizing them. This allows her to change, along with others, the inadequate procedures designed to generate action.

This attachment to life could be likened to the virtue of humility as far as knowledge is involved. In other words, this means that the model and the action which derives from this model will never, for the reasonable humble being, be stronger than the effects he experiences in his flesh while listening to the other's voice. This means that he does not treat others with derision, he does not pretend to listen to them, only to proceed to defend the conclusions of abstract reasoning, which is particularly noticeable when human beings are part of the model, (i.e. in human resources management). While being rooted in incarnated invisible life as opposed to abstract representations, calculations and results, the reasonable and humble *parlêtre* will have the resources to deal with others at a reasonable level, which requires taking into consideration the reality of events and situations. While controlling, he/she will not be subject to the selfish omnipotence associated with identification with abstract results or schemes which leads to violence and brutality and, sometimes in the modern world of communication, to that perverse derision which consists in confusing the good of the organization with the good of

people. Of course, the open anthropology introduced here requires further development in order to articulate the new meaning of listening, dialoguing, deliberating or debating about choices - while organizing.

This open anthropology leads us to question the managerial models from a particular angle. This article argues that subjects, opened to incarnated life and speech, will set up, while managing, open spaces to speech where rational models and procedures can be challenged by the voice of people opened to the voice of living flesh while they are experiencing specific situations. This is particularly true in the case of highly standardized processes, as we observed in the quality standardization situation. This idea underlines the importance of many existing practices (quality circles, semi-autonomous teams, organizational learning, etc) where subjects' speech, rooted in actual lived experience, can be taken into consideration and challenge existing rules, procedures and categories. In this respect, a highly revealing example is provided by Heckscher and Donnellon (1994) in a case study where they describe the establishment of a Team Norm Review Board where managers and trade unions representing the employees can meet and talk on an equal footing and where the rules are accompanied by a kind of mutual recognition and are regularly reviewed and changed. In Heckscher's view the aim of such a perspective is to enable the organization to respond to its environment in the best way possible. Though the case study is not reported in great detail (it does not include, for example, quotations from people) it is possible to suppose that the quality of dialogue Heckscher reports which built trust was largely due to the various participants' connection with life through speech which make the social body come alive. Heckscher and others call for trust, dialogue, and mutual understanding in order to have more efficient, flexible organizations. But they ignore the uniqueness of the subject's voice, which is rooted in living flesh and has broken away from the goals and objectives of the organization. According to the main points I have made in this paper, reviewing the organization, while ignoring human subjectivity carries a high risk of derision – hence the need for rethinking organizing and managing based on a renewed understanding of human beings.

### **Conclusion**

Derision in organizations is a specific form of violence which consists in putting subjectivity at the forefront and then negating it. This common phenomenon is due to the confusion between two levels of language in numerous managerial techniques. The first level through the notion of communication, involvement, and motivation, pushes managers to address subjectively to the people they manage. The second level formatted by the shape of objectifying anonymous and instrumental rationality negates the initial attempt at openness. In this

paper I have described the impact of such managerial derision: work under pressure and the elimination of desire for the Other, loss of faith in life, false sociability, exclusion through shock and stupefaction. Although written from a critical standpoint, this paper, introduces through Vasse and Henry a new ontology. This ontology focuses on the deep and intimate link each subject has with incarnated life which reveals itself through speech. Thus, this ontology indicates how through the “suspend” or “*epoché*” the subject who manages has the option not to confuse the two levels of language and thereby avoid derision. Moreover, this ontology of the living, this incarnated *parlêtre* is a new perspective, distinct from modern or post-modern thought. It suggests a possible immanent foundation of the social and organizational link: incarnated life which speaks to differentiated living beings. It gives a new connection between life and reason. This opens up considerable possibilities for further research: rethinking the foundation of action, norms and values, organization, giving new sense to listening, speaking, debating and deliberating. Turning away from the derision inherent in communicative instrumental rationality and balancing the drive for efficiency and profit-making on the one hand, and the human dimension – the subject’s access to incarnated life revealing itself through speech within the symbolic order – on the other, puts the question of human rights within modern organizations in a new light.

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