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Death and the Penguin: Modularity, alienation and organising

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Abstract

The originality of this paper lies in the ways in which it explores how the depiction of organised crime within Andrey Kurkov's novel *Death and the Penguin* can inform our understanding of organisational modularity. This non-orthodox approach might open up new avenues of thought in the study of organisational modularity while further illustrating how novelistic worlds can inform accounts of organisational realities. Two main research questions underlie the paper. How can Andrey Kurkov's novel further our understanding of the complexity of organisational worlds and realities by focusing our attention on different landscapes of organising? How does Kurkov's novel help us grasp the concept of modularity by drawing attention to new forms of modular organisation? Drawing from our reading of Kurkov's novel, we primarily explore organisational modularity through Kurkov's depiction of organised crime and consider the themes of alienation and isolation in the context of modular organising.

Key words

Organised crime, Modularity, fiction, Alienation

Word count: 8962

Introduction

The forces of globalisation, the digitalisation of society and an ever-greater sense of competitiveness worldwide have increasingly challenged bureaucratic forms of organisation (Courpasson and Reed 2004; Pulignano and Stewart 2006), with flexibility, adaptability and dynamicity enacted as highly valued competencies at the workplace (Kallinikos 2003; Marsden 2004) in both the private and the public sector. The retreat of bureaucratic forms of organising, sometimes criticized for their lack of responsiveness to complex and ever-changing economic environments (Alvesson and Willmott 2002), has been paralleled by the advance of alternative, so called ‘post-bureaucratic’, logics of organising (Grey and Garsten 2001; Heckscher 1994). Within the post-bureaucratic rhetoric, various forms of organisation have emerged, such as the networked organisation (Morton 1991), the virtual corporation (Davidow and Malone 1992), the project-based organisation (Hodgson 2004) and the modular organisation. The notion of modularity has been deployed in a variety of academic fields and is a central concept in the management literature (D’Adderio and Pollock 2014). While the notion of modularity (especially product design modularity) has received a lot of attention in the management literature, research on organisational modularity remains limited (Campagnolo and Camuffo 2010). We can define a modular system or organisation as ‘composed of units (or modules) that are designed independently but still function as an integrated whole’ (Baldwin and Clark 1997, 86). As noted by Hirst and Humphreys (2015, 1536), modularity is ‘deeply embedded in the modern institutional landscape, and underpins the articulation between different domains’.

The consequences of the introduction of modular logics of organising have seldom been explored with respect to the position of employees in such organisations. The adoption of modular logics has tended to place emphasis on adaptability, independence and enhanced flexibility; however, these practices have changed the nature of work (Kallinikos 2004) by placing considerable demands on employees to exert greater self-control and self-organisation of their work-related activities (Clarke 2008). In the image of the modular man developed by Gellner (1994), employees increasingly need ‘the ability to compartmentalize thought and action into separate modules which can be deployed flexibly’ (Hirst and Humphreys 2015, 1533). At present, such modularity of existence remains underexplored in the management literature. It has, however, featured prominently in accounts of the organisation of espionage (Philby 1968) and (organised) criminal enterprise (Gambetta 1993; Jenkins 1992; Quinones 2016; Reuter 1985). We will focus on a specific depiction of organised crime in this paper.

The originality of this paper lies in the ways in which we explore how the depiction of organised crime within Andrey Kurkov’s novel *Death and the Penguin* might inform our understanding of organisational modularity. We believe that this unorthodox approach opens up new avenues of thought in the study of organisational modularity while further illustrating how novelistic worlds can inform accounts of organisational realities. In this respect we follow in the steps of Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux (2005) in reconciling literary and organisational interpretation. We do so to pose two main research questions. First, seeking to explore the complex and fascinating relationship between novels and organisations, we ask: How can Andrey Kurkov’s novels further understanding of the complexity of organisational worlds and

realities by focusing attention on different landscapes of organising? Second, with a more specific concern with the concept of organisational modularity: How can Kurkov's novel help us grasp the concept of modularity differently by drawing attention to new forms of modular organisation? The organisation depicted by Kurkov upon which our exploration of modularity is based is the post-Soviet mafia¹, which we explore as an organisational phenomenon (Granter 2017; Hortis 2014; Parker 2012).

Our paper contributes to two distinct fields: on the one hand, that which seeks to investigate the insights literature brings to the study of organisational worlds (see Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux 2005; De Cock 2000) and on the other, research specifically exploring the notion of modularity in organisations (for an extended literature review see Campagnolo and Camuffo 2010). Through the paper, we illustrate how a novel can expand our knowledge of modularity by developing different images of modularity to those commonly encountered in mainstream management and organisation literature. Our reading of modularity speaks to Adler's (2012) focus on the ambivalence of bureaucracy, by highlighting both the possibilities and shortcomings of modular organisations. Modular organisation, we argue, produces a form of workplace alienation different to that enacted by bureaucratic organisations.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the management literature that has engaged with the concept of modularity. This includes a discussion of how the concept is related to organised crime. We follow this with a concise review of the literature investigating the rich and productive relationship between fiction and the field of organisation studies. The fourth section consists in a

¹ For the use of this term, see (Varese 2011, 6).

summary of Kurkov's novel *Death and The Penguin*. Drawing from our reading of Kurkov's novel, we first explore organisational modularity as depicted by Kurkov (2003) and then we delve into the themes of alienation and isolation with respect to modular organising. The conclusion outlines the contributions of this paper.

Modularity and the Organisation

In their review of the concept of modularity in the field of management, Campagnolo and Camuffo (2010) distinguish between three main streams of literature with respect to the concept of modularity: product design modularity (Fixson 2005; Ulrich 1995), production system modularity (Takeishi 2002) and organisational design modularity (Hoetker 2006; Simon 2002). Within the third stream, a number of papers have sought to apply the notion of modularity to organisations as a whole (see Djelic and Ainamo 1999; Helfat and Eisenhardt 2004; Worren et al. 2002).

Modularity may offer various advantages. By adopting a modular logic of organising, organisations can reconcile flexibility and cost efficiency (Djelic and Ainamo 1999), while demonstrating greater reactivity to change (Nadler and Tushman 1999). Furthermore, modularity allows for the manageability of complexity (Baldwin and Clark 2000), enabling organisations to maintain a high degree of innovation (Simon 1996), as well as improving product quality (Shamsuzzoha et al. 2010). It has also been argued that modularity contributes to simplifying organisational processes and practices (Pandremenos et al. 2009). It is worth noting that, in the field of management, the majority of research on modularity is industry-based. Our study of modularity through novelistic rather than primary research and consulting encounters

provides a different ways of engaging with the concept. In a work of fiction, we find that modularity emerges in more existentially relevant terms.

The mafia and organisational modularity

Parallels between criminal organisations and their ‘legitimate’ counterparts have been drawn since the 1970s if not before and various scholars have demonstrated how similar logics underlie both mainstream organisations and mafias (Arlacchi 1988; Cederström and Fleming 2016; Gambetta 1993; Gond, Palazzo, and Basu 2009; Granter 2017; Parker 2012; Saviano 2008; Stohl and Stohl 2011). We embrace this logic by positioning mafias, including that around which Kurkov’s novel revolves, as an instance of a modular organisation (see Baldwin and Clark 1997, 2000).

Popular understandings of mafias are perhaps influenced by the media, and by the ‘discovery’ of the American mafia in the 1960s as a nationwide, hierarchically structured and organisationally disciplined conspiracy complete with organigrammes and a de-facto board of directors (Varese 2010, 4). As Varese (2010) has noted however, scholarly conceptualisations have evolved and given rise to different paradigms relating to the form taken by mafia groups. In the 1970s as noted above, the ‘crime as business/business as crime’ paradigm began to dominate, with notions of ‘illegal enterprises’ and fluid and temporary coalitions rather than monolithic organisations (Block 1980; Reuter and Rubinstein 1978; Smith 1980). Scholars such as Reuter (1985) and Kelly (1999, 12) note that criminal business is incompatible with bureaucratic control due to the necessity of restricting information flows and indeed, written evidence. It is also more operationally efficient to decentralise and capitalise on the talents and initiatives of more dispersed individuals and groups, rather than

attempt a command and control model from the top down. Guerrero-Gutiérrez writes of (Mexican) crime cartels as ‘dynamic organizations with a high adaptation capacity’ (2011, 38) where risk is reduced by outsourcing activities. If members of ‘cells’ are arrested, they can *say* little about the cartel overall, because they *know* very little. Colombian cartels use a similar ‘modular approach’ for their operations in the USA (Williams and Savona 1996, 19). Sicilian ‘men of honour’ claim not to even know to which ‘family’ others belong (Gambetta 1993, 123). Of course, further evidence of the mafia’s modular nature is the existence of highly autonomous sub groups within the supposed larger organisation, such as mafia clans and families within the cultural, economic and quasi-political governance structure of the mafia as a whole.

The modular nature of organised crime has been emphasised most strongly perhaps by the network theory of criminal enterprise. Here, organised crime, similarly to the post-bureaucratic organisation, comprises “‘a flexible order” whose structural arrangements are lighter on their feet than “slow moving” hierarchies and are quick to adjust to changing situations and opportunities’ (Varese 2010, 8; see also Morselli 2009, 11). Post Soviet mafias for example, are able to seek out opportunities (for investment, money laundering, partnerships with other mafias) on a global scale. Russian, Georgian, Ukrainian mafiosi can set up cells in Rome, Budapest, or New York, bringing with them, or acquiring their own ‘project team’ with diverse skills and specialisms (Varese 2011, 65-86).

While mafias are characterised by considerable modular autonomy it would be stretching credibility to describe them merely as networks or ephemeral ‘enterprises’. In mafias at least, there is a system of rules, grievance procedures and initiation

rituals, encompassed within a hierarchy of some form. Modular they may be, but mafias are more than the sum of their parts and are characterized by their own form of ‘corporate governance’ (Varese 2010, 14) in order to manage members’ often competing interests and to reproduce the group as a sustainable economic *and* cultural and political entity over time (Varese 2017, 69-103).

The tension between coherent and identifiable hierarchy and cellular, modular form is highlighted by the fate of individual members or associates (the most elementary module) who are considered to know too much about the organisation (Tondo 2015); they are, to borrow an old Soviet expression, ‘liquidated’. This applies also to external threats, although a different *modus operandi* is employed. While the mafioso is kept close to the organisation until the moment he is killed by a colleague, those destined to become ‘illustrious corpses’ due to their knowledge of, and fight against the mafia are progressively alienated from their institutional support structure before being eliminated (Dickie 2004, 385; Stille 1995, 69-70). Ultimately, mafiosi may be allowed to think for themselves, but disobeying orders can prove fatal. Such contradictions mean a life of constant danger, of constant anxiety (Nuzzi and Antonelli 2010, 39-42).

Literary and Organisational worlds

In *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur (1992, 159) notes that literature provides ‘an immense laboratory for thought experiments’. Such a statement highlights the promises of engaging with literary works within the broader context of social sciences (see Praver (1976) on Marx’s literary influences, for instance). In this vein, novels and literary works have come to occupy an ever-greater role in the understanding of the complexity of organisations and organising (Czarniawska-Joerges and de

Monthoux 2005; De Cock 2000; De Cock and Land 2005; Land and Sliwa 2009; Phillips 1995). Insights gleaned from novels' imaginative capacities challenge the thinness of formalist and rational accounts of organisations (see Knights and Willmott 1999; Sliwa and Cairns 2007). Novels can be read as quasi-ethnographies (Czarniawska 2009), providing rich, detailed and thick empirical accounts relevant to the exploration of fragmented organisational realities (Rhodes and Brown 2005).

Unsurprisingly, Franz Kafka has been a central figure in this attempt to produce 'an anthropology of organizations that includes literary work' (Czarniawska 2009, 366). As noted by Munro and Huber (2012, 24), 'Kafka is perhaps the 20th Century's most profound commentator on organizational life'. For Parker (2005, 160) Kafka offers insight through 'darkly fantastic representations of work and organizations'. A plethora of organisational research articles engaging with the dense and polymorphic literary work of Kafka accords with this insight (Clegg et al. 2016; Hodson et al. 2013; Keenoy and Seijo 2009; Kornberger, Clegg, and Carter 2006; McCabe 2004; Rhodes and Westwood 2016; Warner 2007). While Kafka's influence on the rethinking of organisational processes and practices is clear, others have also been instrumental in the unfolding of organisational intricacies. For instance, Rhodes (2009) draws from Charles Bukowski's *Factotum* to explore the theme of resistance within organisations; Beyes (2009) uses Pynchon's novel, *Against the day*, to produce a critique of capitalist organising; Sliwa et al. (2012) draw from Muramaki's novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, to reflect on leadership; Patient et al. (2003) use Russo's novel, *Straight Man*, to study envy in organisations; Geesin and Molan (2017) draws on Storey's *This Sporting Life* to explore the intersections between sports work, industrial organisation, body and identity, Prasad (2014) draws on James' *50 Shades of Grey*

series to explore the intersections of hedonism, desire, and transgression while Sliwa and Cairns (2007) highlight the insights to be found in the literary works of Aldous Huxley and Milan Kundera. This list is by no means exhaustive but it does illustrate the complex and polymorphic connections charted between literary and organisational worlds.

Engagement with literary works takes many different directions. De Cock and Land (2006) identify three different ways in which the domains of literature and organisation studies have become intertwined in the study of organisational worlds. First, using the tools of literary inquiry and criticism to reform the field of organisation studies (O'Connor 1995; Rhodes 2000); second, resorting to literary modes of representation in the articulation of organisational knowledge (i.e. exploring the implications of positioning the writing of organisational accounts as a literary genre) (Watson 2000); third, drawing from the so-called 'great tradition' (Leavis 1948, 17) of literature, even while extending the cannon, interrogating it for its 'vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity' in order to develop organisational theory and morally improve managerial practices (De Cock 2000; Knights and Willmott 1999).

The present paper seeks to explore how Kurkov's novel *Death and The Penguin* may offer an alternative way of engaging with organisational worlds and realities, more particularly, with the concept of modularity, while also dealing with displacement, emphasizing how novels can open up new spaces of inquiry for management scholars. With respect to the ways in which the reading of the text unfolds, this paper engages with the notion of 'lay reading', as defined by DeVault (1990). Lay reading seeks to

break from classical interpretive traditions of novel reading and analysis, thus setting aside the authority of the expert reading in order to open up a range of possibilities in reading literary works. Importantly, this does not entail a naïve reading of the text (Sliwa and Cairns 2007), one that is literal; rather, the text opens a plethora of interpretations, connections and relationalities. Reading always has a ‘situated character’ (DeVault 1999, 105): any text can be read and interpreted in many different ways, leading to an engagement with completely different sets of ideas and problems. No reading is ever a definitive interpretation; all reading is active, enacting particular sense in particular contexts; this reading of *Death and the Penguin* is no exception.

Death and the Penguin: Introducing the novel

In *Death and The Penguin*, first published in Russian in 1996, Kurkov explores post-Soviet reality in the mid 1990s. Kurkov (2003) composes a social satire in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism and the uncontrolled flows of capitalistic relations that are colonizing Ukrainian society. The novel is not assembled around rich descriptions, profound psychological analyses or tormented characters but weaves a sense of unpredictability, irrationality and ultimately fatality. In this sense it can be considered as crime fiction in the distinctively amoral and anomic post-Soviet ‘boevik’ genre (see Borenstein 2008, 159-194). While Kurkov (2003) is not concerned with bureaucratic organisations (in the manner of Kafka), there is a certain Kafkaesque dimension to *Death and The Penguin*, visible around the growing feeling of paranoia that dictates the main character’s actions and by the strong sense of surrealism and absurdity that underlies the novel.

Kurkov (2003) narrates the story of Viktor Alekseyevich Zolotaryov, a failing short-

story writer in Kiev, who shares his life with a penguin, Misha - saved from starvation at the bankrupt local zoo. This penguin is, like Viktor, in a constant state of depression and poor health. Viktor's world changes abruptly when he receives a call from the editor-in-chief of *Capital News*, offering him a lucrative opportunity writing obituaries. The particularity of his job resides in writing creative obituaries (called *obelisks*) of people who are still alive. Viktor is told to choose 'important' people in the news as subjects of his obituaries. As the story progresses, Viktor loses control over the subjects of his obituaries.

Viktor's life seems to take a positive turn, as his work brings in large amounts of money – crucial in a society where relationships are well and truly reduced to the 'cash nexus'. After some time and much to his satisfaction, his first obelisk finally gets published, even though the circumstances surrounding the death of that man remain particularly obscure. Following the publication of this first obelisk, Viktor receives a call from the editor-in-chief asking him to be on his guard.

When 'Misha-non-penguin' – a typically shady character – leaves his young daughter in Viktor's care and then disappears, he seems to accept this puzzling reality without too much resistance and Sonya becomes part of a domestic set-up that if not quite a 'haven in a heartless world', is certainly more comfortable. Viktor employs a nanny to help care for the child, and she (Nina) soon becomes his lover. Professionally however all is not well as his subjects continue to die under mysterious circumstances. Viktor comes to understand that he has been assembling a list of targets for the mafia. Through his obituary-writing activities, he has become embroiled in the network of mobsters and politicians that run most aspects of daily life in Ukraine – a country

Kurkov depicts as the quintessential ‘society of rackets’ (Granter 2017). While worrying evidence of his entanglement piles up, Viktor seems comforted by the editor in chief’s recurrent mention of ‘unseen and unknown’ protection, without which he would probably already be dead.

A turning point in the novel occurs when the editor-in-chief, concerned for his own security, calls Viktor to his office. Once there, Viktor finds a stack of his obelisks with a note stating ‘approved’, along with a date. The term ‘processed’ appears on the obelisks that had already been dealt with. Late in the story, Viktor enquires about the purpose of his work, only for the editor to tell him that such knowledge would prove deadly – to Viktor.

Not in a position to refuse, Viktor and Misha become invited fixtures at a series of mob funerals (for which they are paid) and the penguin soon eclipses his human companion as a macabre sort of mascot. Much to the annoyance of Viktor, Misha earns more money than him into the bargain. However, Misha becomes seriously ill and Viktor learns that he needs an expensive heart transplant operation to survive and that the heart of 3-4 year old child would be ideal. Viktor hesitates, but the person who has been inviting Misha to mob funerals promises to take care of everything and Viktor learns that ‘the boys’ (whoever they might be) will be taking care of the financial aspect of the surgery and are also looking for a transplant for Misha.

In the meantime, Nina tells Viktor about an unfamiliar man asking questions about him. Viktor follows him back to his flat where, holding the stranger at gunpoint, he learns that this man will actually be his successor in writing obelisks and that he is currently writing Viktor’s obituary. In his own obituary, Viktor is described as

‘obsessed with a need to cleanse society’ (Kurkov 2003, 218) and so much of the blame relating to the many deaths connected to the obelisks is placed on him. Viktor also learns through his obituary that Misha has been saved with the transplant of a heart from a young boy who was in a terminal condition. Victor now recalls what the editor-in-chief told him when he inquired about the specifics of his work: ‘when you do know what’s what, it will mean there no longer is any real point to your work or to your continuing existence’ (Kurkov 2003, 220). Facing death at the hands of a powerful criminal network about which he now knows too much, Viktor takes Misha’s place on a prearranged flight to Antarctica. He flees, literally, to the ends of the earth.

Modularity, Alienation and the Organisation

Modularity and organised crime

The organisation with which Viktor becomes associated through his obelisk-writing activities does not revolve around a fixed and distinct structure. On many levels, and as noted before, the modular organisation depicted by Kurkov differs greatly from bureaucratic forms of organisation. One such example is the contrasting ways in which both forms of organisation react to internal dysfunctionality and problems. A bureaucratic organisation is typically very linear in the ways it operates and if an issue occurs at one stage, such as a bottleneck, it can jeopardize the whole system. Linearity with respect to patterns of action is an echo of a wider temporal linearity in bureaucratic organisations premised on Chronos: order, precedence and sequence – all are important. Modular organisations are more efficient when it comes to handling uncertainties and difficulties (Baldwin and Clark 2000; Simon 1996): the failure of

one module does not compromise the others, so that if Viktor fails at his task, another obelisk writer can simply replace him (or the module can be dissolved altogether). Furthermore, modularity allows almost full simultaneity between different actions; for instance, Viktor's obelisk-writing activities can be concomitant with the murder of the person related to that obelisk, thus highlighting the ways in which actions can overlap and unsettle sequential and ordered logics in modular organisations. The linearity of time is also challenged by the fact that one's obituary is written before one's death, at least where the death is one to be marked publically: such obituaries are typically ready for publication when the subjects' action ceases to be.²

Kafka produced a strong critique of bureaucratic forms of organisation by drawing our attention to the innumerable inconsistencies and dead-ends underlying them (Kornberger, Clegg, and Carter 2006; Parker 2005). Kurkov (2003) inhabits quite a different ideational universe. Despite some fundamental differences underlying the ways in which bureaucratic and modular organisations operate, Kurkov (2003) – just as Kafka on bureaucracy (see Kafka 2015) – is keen to put the spotlight on the many inconsistencies, ambiguities and incongruities underlying modular forms of organising. An assembly of rhetorically ironical images gravitate around Viktor and his world whose echoes are familiar to us: hospitals, where elders die unattended; country houses protected by minefields; young mobsters driving expensive cars in a

² Occasionally the causality is reversed: for instance, in Sept. 6, 1871, *The New York Times* ran Karl Marx's obituary. There was just one problem: the original Marxist was still very much alive and remained so for a further 11 years.

grim economic environment; amusement and lack of surprise concerning the presence of a penguin in central Kiev, etc.³

By emphasising the multiplicity of images connected to the activities of the mafia organisation, Kurkov (2003) shows how a modular organisation does not necessarily appear in the image of rational sense-making and opens up a world of uncertainties and possibilities. While this is not explicitly the focus of this research paper, there is a certain interest in looking at the differences between bureaucratic and modular organisations in relation to Kurkov's novel, as former Soviet countries relied extensively on bureaucratic modes of organising (Deroy and Clegg 2015; Grabher and Stark 1997). In that sense, Kurkov's novel seeks to capture some of the changes connected with a transition towards 'post-bureaucratic' and more market-based logics of organising, a shift that has received much attention in different literatures.

As we have suggested, while Kurkov's writing appears rather Kafkaesque, drawing on a similar gallery of existential angst, anomie and animals, the organising devices are quite dissimilar. There is an absence of a labyrinthine bureaucracy; instead, there is a strong sense of a personal relation at the core of organising. The office of the editor-in-chief is active as a fulcrum for this modular organisation inasmuch as the editor is seen to coordinate some of the activities of the mobsters. In that sense, the mafia modular organisation as depicted by Kurkov (2003) seems to be primarily a 'space-less' form of organising or rather a form of organisational design in which spatialities need to be performed and enacted on specific occasions. Many different places

³ While, even the anxious readers of the popular press, such as the *Daily Mail*, might find the idea of a minefield around a country house unusual they might not find the presence of the penguin surprising (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4042674/The-true-story-eccentric-British-teacher-penguin-best-pals-bird-rescued-oil-slick.html>).

become associated with the activities of the mobsters (e.g. the house of a corrupted deputy; isolated warehouses where illegal merchandise is stored; government offices; the headquarters of an established newspaper, etc.) in very specific circumstances. While the organisation reaches into all these sites, there is not a stabilized form of spatiality associated with its modular logic of organising. The blurriness of the boundaries of the organisation is evident through these various different sites. In certain ways, the blurriness of the boundaries of modular organisations seems to be compensated by the presence of an established pattern of hierarchy broadly following task allocations: a boss, counsellors, mid-ranking members, soldiers and a group of people more or less closely connected to the mobsters that occasionally get involved in mafia activities.

Yet again, this image needs to be nuanced: if modular organisations present flatter hierarchies (Campagnolo and Camuffo 2010) – which can be observed through the casualness of the exchanges between Viktor and his ‘boss’ – members of a modular organisation possess very little (if any) information relating to other modules constituting the organisation. Managing in the dark is the norm. Viktor knows that his editor-in-chief occupies a more senior position than he does in the organisation but he does not know who is at its head or what other people occupy a similar position to that of the editor-in-chief (or even to his own). Within the context of a modular organisation, this greatly simplifies various procedures – such as replacing members – because relatively little time needs to be dedicated to introducing them to the ‘organisation’ and its culture, norms and practices. They are organisational members primarily through transactional contracts (see Rosenblat and Stark 2016). As noted by

Langlois (2000, 19), through modularity, organisations can ‘eliminate what would otherwise be an unmanageable spaghetti tangle of systemic interconnections’.

While there is a broad but non-traditional sense of hierarchy and some places are loosely associated with this form of organising, there is undeniably a strong sense of performativity connected to this mafia organisation. Modularity is achieved and performed through the complex ways in which the organisation presented by Kurkov (2003) connects to virtually all aspects of modern life in Ukraine. Put differently, the modular organisation presented by Kurkov (2003) is akin to an octopus (Magyar 2016, 63), having a tentacle reaching into almost all aspects of daily life, yet with the particularity of being hidden in plain sight.

Kurkov’s novel unfolds in the mid-1990s in post-Soviet Ukraine and so modularity is not yet enabled by information technologies (contrary to the notion of digital technologies as instrumental to the advent of modularity in organisations). Furthermore, the elusiveness and lack of materiality of the mafia organisation depicted by Kurkov (2003) is reinforced by the emphasis on vocal over written communications. While certain key documents would be produced in a written form (e.g. the stack of obelisks kept in the editor-in-chief’s safe), most communications were oral, enhancing the difficulty of tracing events and associations. The different modules appear to be highly fragmented (i.e. connections are only performed on specific occasions), as the absence of written documents implies that only the people closely connected to a particular case or event will possess the required information (i.e. knowledge is contained within modules).

The organisation presented by Kurkov (2003) can be assimilated to the image of the

rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) inasmuch as it does not have specific directions and can grow in virtually any direction (depending on both endogenous and exogenous forces). No fundamental parts (or modules) define such organising. The strength of a modular organisation rests on the absence of a ‘vital organ’ without which the organisation could not run and would collapse. It has no heart or head to remove so is highly flexible and reactive to change (Nadler and Tushman 1999; Schilling and Steensma 2001) as most modules can be replaced without any serious impact. In that sense, a modular organisation is more reactive to turbulent business environments and can initiate change more rapidly in such contexts. As noted by Kurkov (2003), in a modular organisation everything can be solved easily (‘the boys will handle it’, ‘don’t worry, the guys are on it’, etc.). Enhanced flexibility is also reflected in the ways in which employees work in the ‘organisation’. In a sense, Viktor’s work gives him a great deal of flexibility and (barring the odd ‘crunch’ deadline – Peticca-Harris, Weststar, and McKenna 2015) he is in control of his own work routine. Organisational design and governance is transformed due to decentralised and distributed characteristics. Each obelisk is one in a series of distributed ledgers that record and maintain indefinitely an ever-growing list of data records of death, records that cannot be altered or tampered with: they just are – much as is the case with a modern blockchain. Through the obelisks the process of developing, executing and evaluating decisions becomes automated and the obelisk makes the record of decision irreversible. The obelisk establishes a form of finitude.

The mafia organisation portrayed by Kurkov (2003) highlights both the elusiveness of its being and the strong sense of performativity underlying the ways in which it operates. Modular organisations perform temporal simultaneity through their rhizome-

like rationalities of organising. While individuals in modular organisation are simple cogs in a wider machine, the difference with Weber and Kafka lies in the realization that ‘employees’ do not play a key role in a modular organisation (as any module can be removed at any time). In a modular organisation, employees are part of a wider network that keeps being re-shaped and re-performed, in the same way as a rhizome continuously grows in unpredictable directions.

Alienation and isolation in a modular organisation

The following conversation, which occurs midway in the novel between Viktor and the editor-in-chief of *Capital News*, summarises the position of Viktor with respect to his employment:

“Have a holiday,” he said, preparing to leave. “When the dust settles, I’ll return, and we’ll continue the good work.”

“But, Igor, what is the real point of my work?” Viktor asked, stopping him in his tracks.

The Chief considered him through narrowed eyes.

“Your interest lies in not asking questions,” he said quietly. “Think what you like. But bear in mind this: the moment you are told what the point of your work is, you’re dead. This isn’t a film, it’s for real. The full story is what you get told only if and when your work, and with it your existence, are no longer required”.’ (Kurkov 2003, 121)

Throughout *Death and the Penguin*, Viktor is depicted as a relatively one-dimensional character (like most in Kurkov's novel). His role is as a driver of a narrative in which much of the emphasis revolves around the intricacies connected to his obelisk-writing activities (and therefore the peculiarities of his employment). On the one hand, Viktor can be seen to benefit from a great degree of freedom in regard to time management, relations with hierarchy (a flatter hierarchy implying easy access to more senior 'colleagues') and work patterns, while receiving a comfortable income. The structural flexibility of the modular organisation enables these conditions (Baldwin and Clark 1997, 2000; Campagnolo and Camuffo 2010). The extreme flexibility of modular organisations is reinforced by the fact that the employee's' personal expertise is not central to the organisation (Hirst and Humphreys 2015). Viktor did not possess any particular skill related to the job he has been spontaneously offered (writing obituaries) other than being a not very successful short story writer and yet he rapidly becomes very talented at the task. In practical terms, this means that employees, as well as modules, can be replaced rapidly and at a very low cost (echoing what has been said earlier with respect to the limited time spent introducing the organisation and its culture). On the other hand, a feeling of isolation parallels and echoes this enhanced flexibility. Viktor knows that he forms part of a complex network of associations involving a multiplicity of places, actors and processes but in narrative terms the network remains mostly invisible, leaving Viktor in an isolated position.

The performativity and ever-changing nature of the modular organisation with which Viktor becomes associated is demonstrated on various occasions throughout the novel as shaping the ways in which Viktor experiences and engages with his new work. At the beginning of the novel his status changes from being an unemployed and

unsuccessful author to becoming a skilled and in-demand obelisk writer. Towards the end of the novel, when Viktor discovers the reason why a stranger follows Nina and Sonya and inquires about him, his death has become irremediable, thus fulfilling the prophecy announced by the editor-in-chief: once Viktor knows about the implications of his work (i.e. once he assembles a more complete picture of the modular organisation for which he works), his services will no longer be required. In a sense, the various connections and relations established through Viktor's obelisk-writing activities abruptly come to an end, perhaps just as quickly as they started. They contribute to producing a constant feeling of stress and uncertainty, as any module can be deleted or replaced at any point in time (in case of malfunctioning).

In many different ways, Viktor appears as an image of alienation. There is a very dense academic literature on the concept of alienation spanning different fields of inquiry (see Yuill (2000) for a review on the evolution of the concept of alienation). Regardless of their intellectual affiliations and differences (Israel 1971; Meszaros 1975; Seeman 1959) these approaches have sought to highlight the pervasiveness and multidimensionality of alienation (see Shantz et al. 2015). What is common to the different treatments, however, is that alienation not only refers to 'powerlessness and a lack of freedom but also to a characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and world' (Jaeggi 2014, 6). Viktor is not alienated in the sense of being prisoner of his work (though his work is repetitive and not particularly fulfilling, especially as he progressively loses the possibility to choose the subjects of his obituaries) but rather his alienation arises because he does not possess sufficient information to construct a complete image of the organisation with which he has become associated or the purpose of the work that he does, clearly limiting his decision-making possibilities

and autonomy (DiPietro and Pizam 2007). He is a flexible worker but increasingly not autonomous: he can do what he does when he chooses but he cannot choose what he wants to do. In other words, if Viktor's work is flexible, it cannot be defined as autonomous inasmuch as he is constantly presented as waiting for information and directions regarding his job. Furthermore, Viktor does not see the 'whole product' (or end product) connected to his own personal activities (that is the death of the subject of his obituary) and does not possess any ownership over his work (as his obituaries are written under the pseudonym 'a group of friends'). The ways in which elements and actions appear to work independently contributes to the further detachment of employees from their work in a modular organisation.

The experience of alienation connected to a modularity of organising differs greatly from the images of alienation that emerge from accounts on bureaucracies. While Baldry et al. (1998) comment on how the dark satanic mills, the manufactories of Marx's day, were replaced by 'bright satanic offices' with the growth of bureaucracy, our paper highlights how modularity allows for the expansion of entrapment to a completely different level from the cogs of the machine or the 'iron cage'. The modular organisation becomes embedded within the core of our social, political and economic realities; one simply cannot be a classically 'instrumental worker' whose 'escape attempts' render the cage bearable.⁴

Conclusion

⁴ The text in inverted commas refers, respectively, to two remarkable examples of industrial sociological analyses of bureaucratic organisations: Goldthorpe et al. (1969) and Cohen and Taylor (1992).

While centralisation and formalisation (embedded in bureaucratic forms of organising) have been presented as promoting workplace alienation (see Blauner 1964; Mottaz 1981), we can appreciate how a different form of alienation emerges from a modular organisation revolving around flexibility and decentralisation. Kurkov (2003) conjures up the image of the alienated worker in a modular organisation that enacts a different form of precariousness, one in which the lack of tangibility and enhanced independence between the different modules (Campagnolo and Camuffo 2010) leads to flexible ease in removing a module at any time. Compared to a bureaucratic organisation, no module is a vital organ and if some modules disappear, new ones will emerge, rhizomatically, along with new forms of connectivity and new relations. Ultimately, continuously new forms of precariousness and dependency align with being fully flexible. The fact that Viktor must depend on the limited amount of information he is given (occasionally learning that he has to hide from hit men who are seeking to eliminate him) reinforces the feeling of isolation produced by this modular mafia organisation. Finally, Viktor seems oblivious to all that is happening around him; blindly he follows whatever direction he is given by his direct boss - seduced by the easy money he obtains and reluctant to question the ways in which the system operates for fear of losing the advantage of being employed in it. Viktor's 'rise' to a higher status (along with the mafia interest in his writing competencies) is as swift as his fall when he learns that an obelisk is being written about him. Viktor experiences a blurring of the boundary between private life and work commitments, as he needs always to be available (always contactable or contractible) when needed. He spends a great deal of time expecting to be contacted by his boss, displaying a high level of dependency, being obliged to accept any work offered. There is a constant

tension between flexibility/autonomy, connectivity/isolation and unpredictability/planning with respect to Viktor's obelisk-writing activities. Flexibility and decentralisation are seen to produce isolation (difficulty of knowing the boundaries of the organisation as well as other persons involved), high information dependency as well as a false feeling of comfort and security.

In a final coda, we see that Misha is Viktor's alter ego, a creature out of context, in an alienating world that it struggles to understand, surviving, sickly and isolated, void of human form. In that sense, we can, perhaps, appreciate more deeply the wider resonance of the final sentence in the novel: "The penguin," said Viktor bleakly, "is me" (Kurkov 2003, 228).

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