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Metaphors and the Cultural
Context of organizing

Barbara Czarniawska

Gothenburg Research Institute
School of Economics & Commercial Law
at Göteborg University

Barbara.Czarniawska@gri.gu.se

Abstract

When the linguistic turn reached organization studies, it manifested itself in the first place by the interest in metaphors. The crucial role of these tropes for theory building was emphasized, and their place in the very process of organizing was highlighted. In this paper, I attempt to nuance these findings by showing more complex aspects of the use of metaphors in everyday organizing efforts. In the first place, metaphors do not only aid organizing, but also hamper it, as shown on the example of introduction of a rapid tram in the center of Rome. This mundane process of a traffic innovation has been flooded in metaphors by the massmedia who, however, were all along helped by the organizational actors. The result was an undue dramatization of the event, which made the operation of the tram unnecessarily problematic. The second point is, that such tendency to "metaphor abuse" and dramatization is a part of the cultural context of organizing, as illustrated by contrasting the way in which similar event in Stockholm was portrayed by the Swedish media. Italian rhetorical tradition contrasts visibly with the Scandinavian tendency to pragmatism and understatement. The case reported in the paper and its readings are meant to explore further ways of applying insights of language and literature theory to further understanding of the increasing complexity of organizing processes

Until the late 1970s, metaphors remained a subject matter of literary criticism, semiotics, and hermeneutics. The 1980s witnessed a dramatic "linguistic turn" in social sciences, which started to examine its rhetoric. Ricca Edmondson wrote the *Rhetoric in Sociology* in 1984, and Deirdre N. McCloskey published *The Rhetoric of Economics* in 1985. In 1987, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences. Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (edited by Nelson, Megill and McCloskey) was published, followed by Herbert Simons' (ed.) *Rhetorical Turn* in 1988. By 1988, Robert Solow was pointing out that it was time to move beyond the "look, Ma, a metaphor" stage and speak about consequences of economic rhetoric (the book under this title has been edited by Klammer, McCloskey and Solow). One began to speak of "logic of inquiry", often in a daring plural, and the fact that scientists use a rich repertoire of persuasive instruments was no longer a startling discovery.

In organization theory, it was Gareth Morgan who first suggested that research paradigms were situated in master-metaphors of organization (Morgan 1980, 1983, and 1986). After that, the question of rhetoric was raised unsystematically in various works inspired by Kenneth Burke (of which the best known is perhaps Mangham and Overington's *Organizations As Theatre*, 1987) and more systematically in works originating in communication studies (especially in work by George Cheney, such as *Rhetoric in an Organization Society*, 1991).

A differentiating trait of treatment of rhetoric in organization theory was that it did not limited itself to analyzing the rhetoric of the discipline, but also in the rhetoric of the field of practice it has been studying. Early on, it has been suggested that the "metaphors of the field" can become a tool for comparative analysis of different organizations (Manning, 1979), and that social policy formulation is guided by what Schön (1979) called "generative metaphors". It was postulated that metaphors were

much more than symbols: if they served the function of symbolic expression, they were also instrumental, used for control purposes, and therefore bridged the expressive and the practical orders in organizations (Harré, 1981). Morgan summarized it most succinctly:

... the process of metaphorical conception is the basic mode of symbolism, central to the way in which humans forge their experience and knowledge of the world in which they live (1980: 610).

From the beginning then, metaphors were tropes treated mostly favorably in organization theory's rhetorical analyses (see e.g. Morgan, 1986; the special issue of *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* dedicated to "Managerial and Organizational Rhetoric", 1995; Grant and Oswick, 1996, Lennie, 1999). It has been pointed out that they were an invaluable tool of organizing (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1988). One reason was that they provided ambiguity, indispensable for people with many different interests to unite in a collective endeavor without necessarily uniting their points of view. Another, and opposite reason, was that, by familiarizing the unknown, they reduced the immobilizing uncertainty caused by new or surprising situations, abundant in organizing efforts. The third reason was that they provided color and entertainment to the sometimes-dreary everyday life in work organizations. Thus, if there were any warnings against the abuse of metaphors, they mostly concerned their use in organization theory, and the alleged threat to its "scientificity" (Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982). One exception was the work of Höpfl and Maddrell (1996) who showed how "evangelical" metaphors were used in appropriation of emotions in organizational life.

This positive bias towards the use of metaphors (compared to the use of other rhetorical figures) may be read as a cultural trait. Most of the writing on the use of metaphors in organizing originated in Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian or Germanic cultures. These countries' languages have a preference for understatement and flat discourse; the metaphor appears to be an exotic flower in the midst of the evenly cut grass lawn – frightening, exciting, disgusting, appealing, but always provoking strong emotions. This "natural" attitude overlooks the possibility of another state of affairs, a lawn so filled with exotic flowers that the tired eye longs for the tranquilizing effect of evenly cut grass – a platitude or two.

The Most Metaphorized Streetcar in the World

Just how viciously the metaphors can be used in practice of organizing became clear to me in a study of an extremely ambitious case of organizing – that of improving traffic in Rome. Rome is the only European capital that does not have a traffic system designed at one go and according to consistent principles¹. At the time of the study (1998) the city authorities were involved in a heroic effort to improve the traffic conditions by, among other measures, introducing a rapid tram track leading to the historical center. Although it is an ambition equal to those of Roman emperors who built the city, it consists of many mundane steps like introduction of technologies, signing the streets, adapting the

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timetables etc. These many organizing efforts are of course thwarted by more or less trivial accidents, mishaps and difficulties, as all organizing efforts are.

I chose to follow the events through their press coverage, encouraged by the observation formulated by Putnam: "In the contemporary world, other mass media also serve the function of town crier, but particularly in today's Italy, newspapers remain the medium with the broadest coverage of community affairs" (1993, p. 92).

Accordingly, I followed the press coverage of traffic issues in Rome through 1998 and until the beginning of 1999, but will present in detail only a short excerpt relating to the new tram. As to the overall picture, suffices to say that, throughout the whole period of the study, there were very few utterances in the press that did not contain metaphors, metonymies, puns, hyperbolas, and other tropes. The Bible, Tennessee Williams, TV, war, and sports were all sources of inspiration.

This, in fact, is but an example of what Murray Edelman (1988) perceives as the main occupation of the media, a creation of a spectacle. Concrete news and pieces of information find their place but do not incite much enthusiasm. The most attractive are accidents, followed at a distance by celebrations and other positive events. The news undergoes a dramatization through metaphorization. As Edelman observed, "Dramatization, simplification, and personification (including the personification of historical trends and social institutions into leaders and enemies) are common means, especially in lead sentences and headlines" (1988, p.80)

The journalists do not produce the facts by themselves, though. There is an intense co-production of facts between the journalists and the other collective actors, a co-production which is not always based on cooperation. It is a very efficient co-production in that an enormous number of fact-candidates is produced daily (compared

to the numbers produced in any kind of science) but also a great many facts are refuted daily as not corresponding to the norms of veracity. It is a production of strongly agonist character; there is a continuous battle over words and images. This eventful production of facts constitutes an important part of the action net called big city traffic.

I was not able to study the production of the facts from the raw material, that is, from direct observation of the events. I was, however, lucky enough to be able to document the process in its early stages, that is, beginning with the material arriving at ANSA, the Italian news agency. All documents applying for the status of facts – faxes, official documents, etc. – arrive there. It is there where the journalists collect their raw material, to be expanded by interviews and additional readings, and to be elaborated in the form that will be printed (I am speaking only about the press here). Only exceptionally are the journalists "on the spot" where something is happening. Usually, they learn from ANSA what has happened and where, and eventually go there. As far as I know, the news agencies are never accused of lying or distorting the facts; the later news might cancel the earlier news, but this does not question the status of ANSA. News agencies could be described with the term coined by Michel Callon (1986), as "obligatory passage points" where all fact candidates enter to be then collected by the journalists and consequently elaborated and printed.

In the story that I am going to tell, ANSA is the source of announcements that are at the beginning of the chain of translations made by various collective actors, including the journalists. It is worth pointing out that it is the journalists who work at ANSA.

A day in the life of the unfortunate tram number eight

Starring: TRAM NO. 8, COTRAL/ATAC, (often)
represented by its CEO, the Citizens of Rome

Appearances: AN (National Alliance), Traffic Police,
Mayor, Europe, City Manager, Smart Lights (out of
function), District XV, Vice Mayor Tocci, and many
others²

On the 7th of April 1998 at 06.06 a Peugeot collides slightly with tram no. 8. No serious damages, but neither of the drivers wishes to leave the place before the traffic police establish the responsibility for the accident.

From here the stories begin to differ. According to ATAC/COTRAL, the tram was put back into service at 06.15 (two runs lost, says A/C to underline that the tram runs every 3 minutes). The traffic police arrive at 06.40. Too late, says the A/C accusingly. "We heard about the accident at 06.30", say the traffic police defensively.

The press says the tram was blocked for:

- 9 minutes,
- half an hour,
- 40 minutes,
- almost an hour,
- an hour,
- more than an hour.

² ATAC was the municipal transport agency responsible for buses and the trams; COTRAL was the agency responsible for county transportation on the rail and the metro, but during 1998 the same management ran them. Walter Tocci was the vice-mayor responsible for traffic and public transportation; the City Council had a Left majority, and the National Alliance (AN) was the most vociferous in opposition.

Everybody reports only "what has *actually* happened" and everybody quotes the same source – ANSA. In the meantime the A/C sends another fax to ANSA accusing the traffic police of not policing. A vast action net is clearly being mobilized. The next day the press takes up the accident and the debate, adding much stronger colors. The escalation proceeds (my italics, boldface in the original):

April 7

A/C Press Office to ANSA:

A small accident in the morning...

The traffic police have come to aid the situation only at 06.40, probably because they had to call ANSA first. After which they practically vanished from the line.

ANSA 08.28:

The first street accident...

Changing the adjective "small" into "first" announces that others are to arrive. In the meantime, the accusation launched by A/C is not left without a response:

The commandant of traffic police to ANSA, 14.00:

"Not wishing to engage myself in a debate, I would like to point out that it would be good if everybody took care of their proper business and, experiencing problems, did as we do: resolved them without blaming the others. I would also like to remind the leadership of ATAC that we are all a part of the same institution, the Municipality of Rome."

A response perhaps meant to have a calming effect, but made in public and therefore interpreted as a counterattack:

ANSA 16.42:

The traffic police not only refuse to accept the critique from ATAC... but also *counterattack* pointing out that the information reached them with delay...

The quarrel is on:

A/C to ANSA 16.45:

SOME CLARIFICATIONS:

- 1 – At the moment of the accident the traffic police were not to be found either along the route of tram No. 8 or at [the place they were supposed to be]
- 2 – The traffic police did not admit (dis)informing ANSA when talking about a traffic jam for "more than an hour" ...
- 3 – The traffic police did not confirm their readiness to monitor the crossings, special traffic lanes, and the stops of modes of public transportation.

In the meantime the journalists start doing interviews:

ANSA, 19.46:

"No. 8 must be stopped. It is a *calamity* produced by various incompetents calling themselves 'professors' who pretend to be experts in traffic at the *peril* of the citizens." This according to the prefect of the Roman police, representing Ospol, one of the trade unions of the city police...
"The *umpteenth* accident at the line Casaletto-Argentina ... cannot possibly be explained by the non-intervention of the traffic police who, as is well known, have many other duties. The accidents happen daily, and in front of the public, and as such represent the failure of the traffic policy, which, in the course of few days, provoked rebellion of the citizens against the inefficiency of the services rendered by COTRAL."

One, the first, or the umpteenth accident? "Incident", the word used in Italian, means both "accident" and "incident", and is clearly used in two different ways by different actors. At any rate, if what is meant is an "accident", a street collision, it is "the first". If the term also covers various dysfunctions and technical troubles, it is "the umpteenth". Counting is never a problem, but establishing what is being counted usually is. Observe how the Prefect of Rome creates an actor and the act: the citizens of Rome who are rebelling.

ANSA, 20.39:

"The citizens of Rome are not interested in useless quarrels, but in a common spirit of sincere collaboration aimed at a joint improvement of the services
"...says the City Manager of Rome... "ATAC and the traffic police, says the Manager, are members of the same municipal family. These are two organizations of much value, of much complexity, rich in competence and in problems. We have to work together to solve those problems."

Two combatants, two mediators. Other voices join:

ANSA, 20.50:

"Number 8 works very well, in spite of the defeatists and the drivers who sabotage its course. The real problem is that the tram suffers now from its exaggerated success." This in a note from the Consumer Association...

ANSA, 20.56:

"Rome's public transport – concluded a councilor from NA – cannot be, a short time before the Jubilee – left in the hands of incompetent people. If the CEO of ATAC had a minimum of objectivity he would have left his post to somebody more competent than himself long ago."

I hope that at this point it is clear that I do not intend to blame the journalists. The actors did not need journalists to pick a fight; they were more than ready to do it themselves.

At the end of the day the problems were two: one is a supposed dysfunction of the new line, another a conflict between two city services. As far as the first is concerned, inauguration of new lines or new technologies is usually connected to so-called "infancy problems". One possibility would be to sooth the public by feeding it with technical data, statistics etc. The press of the next day takes a different approach:

April 8

Il Giornale:

According to the traffic policemen represented by Ospotol *"the iron monster that runs between Casaletto and Largo Argentina puts at a hard trial every living being that attempts to cross its path..."* "The tramway, according to the police, "strongly affects the area and the Theater Argentina, that vibrates as though during *an earthquake* each time the 'monster' arrives at the end of its line. *The shocking way of planning* – they add –transformed the whole area of the terminal into *a bedlam..."*

What a pity. Instead of asking the citizens' pardon and reciting **mea culpa** for all these numbers worthy a *fun-fair* of which tram No. 8 is only one example, Atac-Cotral lost yesterday another opportunity to present a decent front (...) with a couple of *vitriolic faxes* sent to the newspapers (...)

Early on there was the *usual daily accident* of the *infamous number 8... the cursed 8.*

La Repubblica:

The soap opera of the Supertram. SuperEight criticized, accused, *unfortunate.* *The latest accident...*

Il Messaggero:

The poisonous Eight (...) has provoked a declaration of war between ATAC and the traffic police. (...) What does it mean? "Each time that an incident happens – explains ATAC – the first thought of the traffic police is how to spread the news, not how to intervene. (...) We have had enough, this *pigeon shooting* must come to an end."

Corriere della Sera:

Arsenic and the old laces. If the Romans did not have enough of the *chaos produced by a revolution* in public transportation that *penalizes thousands* of commuters, now they have a fulfillment:...*the umpteenth* accident at the line Casaleto-Largo Argentina, *the tram of misfortune* (the less understanding tend to call it "incompetence")...

L'Unità:

It is a war between ATAC and the traffic police. Heavy engagement with the use of faxes. Prosecution against Di Carlo. It is truly a *via crucis* for tram no.8.... As the writer Carlo Lucarelli would put it, when plotting the intrigue of a complicated detective story, "there must be something behind it". This "something" is the growing tension in the relations between ATAC and the traffic police...

The detective story is another genre that competes with the Bible, war, and the thriller in the metaphors and the hyperbolas used by the press.

Il Tempo:

Cars against tram. ATAC against the traffic police. *It never rains but it pours* on the rapid tram Casaleto-Largo Argentina. (...) *Crowded like sardines in the tin*, sweaty, stressed and angry. The users of the *cursed Eight* curse themselves but nobody pays attention anymore. (...) On the 8 nobody talks about politics, about Lazio that fails to win the last championship, or about the coming Easter holidays. There is only one topic of discussion; the enormous discomfort in using this public means of transportation that has shown all its cracks even before it started.

And so on, and so forth: 28 articles, long and short, in all the dailies. *L'Espresso*, which being a weekly could not comment on the events of the 7th of April, published an obituary:

L'Espresso

The first hindrance came to light on Monday the 23rd of March, an hour after the start. In the square Ippolito Nievo, all came to a halt with doors closed. The *toy* was broken. (...) **Second day, 7.55 am.** Too many people pushing at

the doors: the *Flying Eight* gets blocked. (...) **Third day.** The Flying Eight runs for one hour when, at the Station of Trastevere, it brakes violently and the supporting bus hits it from behind. **Fourth day.** Two breakdowns in five minutes. First the power line goes down, and after that the motor ceases to function and the stop is definite. **Fifth day.** One car remains standing in front of the ruins of square Argentina because the *power network has been in a bad mood* again. **Sixth day.** (...) the *capricious motor* forced the driver to abandon the tram... **Sunday the 29th of March.** No traffic as there is a marathon. (...) "Bravo Mayor", says some Roman [to Rutelli who is running], "you have reached the end line. The Eight, alas...", **The Eight day,** immediately after the start, the Flying Eight derails. *Amen.*

In spite of this obituary, the Eight is not dead. During 1999 it has become the next most appreciated and reliable means of public transportation, after the subway. Why, then, this media thriller? And, if one has to succumb to the Latin spirit, *cui bono?*

As I have said before, there are at least two issues to be tackled: the adventures of the Flying Eight and the quarrel between ATAC and the traffic police. This is how my interlocutors in the City explain the former:

There are works much more drastic conducted in Rome right now but, as they take place in the suburbs, not in front of everybody's eyes, nobody pays attention ... After all, the 8 is a tram that runs in 80% of its course on the tram rails that already existed. Two small extensions have been made, one at the beginning, and one at the end, so that it could arrive to the central part of the city, to Largo Argentina. Even that is only a temporary end of the line, because the terminal there does not make much sense. Just think about all those trams arriving there full of people, because practically nobody gets off earlier on. If every tram transports 200 people, all of them have to get on board the bus that stops there, that is the 64 that arrives already full from San Pietro, and continues to the Termini Station where there are trains, other busses and the subway. It is obvious that, especially during the rush hours, it is a disaster, because there is no place for all these people in the very physical sense, they cannot get on, even if buses arrive every 3 or 4 minutes. Thus it is obvious that the works on line No. 8 must continue, because now it does not make sense...

- The mistake that has been made was to withdraw, too hastily, all the buses that partly paralleled the tram's course. In fact, they were put back one by one, because otherwise it couldn't function. If the tram had originally been used as a support for the buses, everything would have gone much smoother. This was a mistake, because the tram does have problems. First there were the problems with the power net, the switches that did not function. One could have waited just a little while... (34:3-4)

-Di Carlo asks his technicians "what should we do, should we start running the tram or not?" and they say no, because of various technical problems, but the only thing he can do is to report it to the City and they perhaps have to decide to start it at any rate...

- But how to explain all these accidents?

- There were always accidents in connection to trams. A tram that has to pass 10 crossings has one possibility in 100 to hit a car at one of those ... and this is how it always was. But this line suffered from an exaggerated publicity. Whatever happened, even a person who put his or her foot wrongly and twisted an ankle, was immediately reported. All the dailies, but especially those of the opposition, would dedicate a whole page to the supposed disaster. If you look at this line [he shows me a map of the traffic] you will see that there happen on average 4-5 accidents every month, often fatal accidents, but this is the characteristic of that line, apart from the spectacular lack of discipline of the Roman drivers who do not stop at lights, the pedestrians who cross the streets at any point, not paying any attention to the zebra crossings...

- Aren't they afraid?

- They are used to it. I have once seen a man jogging along the rails and asked him why did he have to jog precisely there. He told me that it was much safer than to

run on the asphalt because he would be certainly hit by a car, whereas the tram passed only every quarter of an hour. (34:8-10)

Even the press admits that there is something to it. As the daily *Italia Oggi* put it: "At the origins of all that was a silly little accident that happened at dawn yesterday, and which surely would have passed unobserved if it had not happened to the *ill-famed* Eight, which, by the way, it is now considered to be *cursed*". The daily continued, quoting the Consumer Association: "many commuters who before used other means of transportation changed to line No. 8, overloading and overcrowding it." (April 8).

Thus we have a new line, open prematurely, overcrowded and exposed to the savage manners of drivers and pedestrians alike, and additionally launched in a dramatic atmosphere created by the media. *L'Unità* has interviewed Mario Di Carlo:

- I am pretty tired of all those threats thrown at the tram Casaletto-Argentina. ATAC is an open company and informs in real time about the difficulties for which it is responsible. Thus I am not amused by this *witch-hunt*.
- **You suggest that he who fights with the press from the press will perish...**
- No, I am not saying even that. Our conduct does not originate from ill will, from the will to retaliate. We simply wish to safeguard ourselves. As for tram No.8, everybody now had the chance to express their opinion on the matter. And everybody took care to explain to us how to run the traffic and how to take care of the passengers. At this point even ATAC can lose its patience.
(April 8)

The daily *Il Giornale* interviewed the commandant of the traffic police instead:

- You are saying that one should wash dirty linen at home?**
- More or less...
- Enough diplomacy, be frank. Why has Atac-Cotral mounted such an attack?**
- Good question. The motives could be varied...
- **To turn the attention away from the storm of criticisms against the tram that got started too early?**
- Can we leave that alone?...
- **Tell me then.**
- It is only a hypothesis: they are probably reacting to the writings that came from our unions, especially Ospol that is very critical of ATAC. They took the

critique badly, very badly. Responsible people do not react with releases of that kind. Some persons would do better with a more constructive attitude. If we responded to the criticisms from the citizens in kind, we would have a civil war in no time.

There are two standard questions that were often asked but that obviously do not make much sense. One is "Who's to blame?", and the other is "Who started it?". The answer to the first is, obviously, everybody: the ruling majority because they did not listen to the technicians, the technicians because they did not do their jobs, the opposition because it antagonized the atmosphere, the ATAC because it provoked the traffic police, the traffic police because they used the street incident to fight their union issues, the drivers and the pedestrians because they are undisciplined, the press because it pours oil onto the flames and so on and so forth. As to who started it, it all depends on how far into the past one is prepared to go: that of the Roman emperors, perhaps? A more promising question is, could it be otherwise?

Fire on the Subway: A Somewhat Dramatic Event?

The Roman battle of metaphors can be contrasted with the opposite attitude of Stockholm media and city authorities, who present even truly dramatic events in pacifying, calm, understated tones, carefully avoiding extravagant tropes. Also in Stockholm a new line of a rapid tram was to be opened, and it had to be delayed because the traffic light system did not work properly. As a recompense, the citizens were offered a ride on the tram on the 17th of October 1999. But on the same Sunday a fire erupted on the green line of the subway, the most popular commuter line in Stockholm. I have followed the coverage of the Stockholm edition of two main dailies between the 7th and the 27th of October 1999. This longish period (considering that one-

day events were in actual focus) was necessary as very few articles on the matter appeared.

Svenska Dagbladet, October 7th

The rapid tram starts from Gullmar Square

The doors to the entrance to the rapid tram nearby the subway at Gullmar Square remain closed and the elevator is immobile. The passengers may not go in even if the new trams depart every 15 minutes from and to Liljeholm.

The line should have been in traffic already a month ago, but the sophisticated light system does not work and we will have to wait until March-April for the suppliers to convince their computers to behave. – In the meantime we run the tram according to the actual timetable, explains the project manager at SL [the regional transport company], Kurt Seliberg.

The inhabitants of the Arsta district can try out their tram already now. Sunday the 17th and the two Sundays after that SL invites everybody to a free ride, as *a balm on the wounds* caused by all the discomforts resulting both from the construction works and the lack of transportation means on the South Ring.

Svenska rode the tram together with the opposition leader, Annika Billström (Social Democrats). The speed was 40 km per hour, not very rapid.

But when the signal system is in place the speed will double...

The rapid tram is to continue further, (...) towards Solna district, but Annika Billström dreams already about a section that will connect the Bromma airport with Kista. The Social Democrats want to construct 70 000 new apartments when the airport closes in 2011, the year when the contract with the Agency for Air Travel expires. That's the place for the rapid tram. – One has to think about the region in a 50-year perspective, she says.

One can always say, truthfully, that the Gullmar-Liljeholm line is peripheral for Stockholm and that even a month's delay could hardly fire anybody's passions. The fire in the subway, though, should qualify as dramatic according to any kind of criteria.

Dagens Nyheter, October 18th

A stop at the green line is to be expected. The green line remained closed until Sunday evening as the result of the morning fire. (...) The burnt cables nearby Central Station produced a lot of smoke, and because of that the police and the fire brigade evacuated the station on Sunday morning. Two guards and an employee of SL were taken to the hospital due to superficial injuries caused by the fire. Four people needed oxygen. **The fire brigade** received the alarm at 09.42 and at 10.31 the fire was already extinguished. The fire started close to the edge of the platform of the green line going in the northern direction, but the smoke did not enter the tunnels. The "smoke divers" checked out the tunnels a hundred meters ahead. The fire was

however so fierce that many cables were burnt. This has stopped all the metro trains. (...) Emergency buses had to be put into service. SL had a lots of problems finding enough buses and drivers. **At 11.15 the blue and red lines were back in service.**

The fares will be raised. The regional traffic councilor, Elwe Nilsson (Moderate) does not change his opinion because of the fire. – An accident like that is always *inopportune*. We do not know the reason yet. But we cannot permit an isolated incident to influence our decision.

No dramatization, no metaphors. "An accident is always inopportune" – talk about understatement.³ The report of the Svenska Dagbladet from the same day was almost identical, but it pointed out that the two guards drove to the hospital in their own car.

Svenska Dagbladet, October 19th

Every fifth subway delayed

SL wants to reach the target of 93% of punctual departures on the green line.

It is almost two years since SL was close to that number (...)

But the county traffic councilor Elwe Nilsson thinks that the subway functions better now than before and that it is time to raise the fares. The County Government makes the decision today.

- We have not raised the prices yet because the signal system did not work properly. But now it does and we can do it.

He quotes statistics showing that the number of extended stops has diminished. (...) The fact that every fifth train on the green line departs with a 3-minute delay is not so important for its passengers. (...) Neither are the accidents of the last year, including the most recent fire, in his opinion. –SL has never decided the prices with accidents as the basis.

For Connex, the company that since last summer manages the Stockholm subway, the fares are a political question that they cannot comment upon. But the company has its doubts about the councilor's idea that the improvement in quality must be postponed. – We do not believe that the passengers will buy the story that the subway got better, says the representative of the press office at Connex, Henrik Kolga. The announcement of the raise of fares caused lots of protests from the political parties. (...) Even the parties in the center are saying that "*raising the prices should be impossible for anybody who has a drop of honor left in their blood.*"

And this week the Stockholm party began a campaign "write to Elwe" suggesting that the Stockholmers should bombard the County with e-mail of protest (...)

³ The Swedes are as fond of *meiosis* as the British are. The current slangish expression, equivalent to the American "I adore jazz" is "I am somewhat enchanted with jazz" (*Jag är lite förtjust i jazz*).

Finally some dramatic tropes and circumlocutions – after all, the press in Stockholm also have to create a spectacle – but the tone is much calmer than in Rome.⁴ One should point out that clearly all, or at least most, Stockholmers have access to a computer.

Dagens Nyheter, October 19th

An umbrella caused the fire in the subway. An umbrella that fell on the rails most likely caused the fire that consumed the cables at Central Station and stopped traffic on the green line for 24 hours. The umbrella caused a short circuit that ignited a pile of garbage nearby the cable. (...) – We are checking the cleaning timetable used in the subway this year and we will intensify the cleaning wherever necessary, says the head of security Johan Hedenfalk. In the fall and during the winter we will also have containers to collect used newspapers at the station. Already during the summer the work of exchanging the old cables will start in the subway.

Nothing more on this topic appears until the 25th of October:

Dagens Nyheter, October 25th

Subway problems already in 1933. The fire at Central Station last Sunday caused a total chaos. But already in 1933 the metro could be dangerous [followed by a story told by a reader whose father worked on the tram in 1933].

One could perhaps ask what the trams have to do with the subway apart from running on rails, but this is not my point – which is that all that is published serves to dampen the tension, to avoid the escalation of negative events.

The *Dagens Nyheter* from the 26th of October contains a whole page advertisement from Connex, the company that makes part of the corporation *Compagne Générale d'Enterprises Automobiles*: **The best subway in Europe in five years.**

⁴ Not that the Swedish press does not dramatize, but it dramatizes different events. The story of Mona Sahlin, a Social Democrat candidate for the post of Prime Minister who used her business credit card to pay for chocolate and diapers for her child has become a tragedy of proportions unthinkable in Italy. At

Svenska Dagbladet, October 27th

Competition is the villain behind the errors of the signaling system

The *ferocious* competition between the producers is to be blamed for the problems with the signaling systems in the transport on rails, says Bo Peterson, a professor at Lund University. The green line, the rapid tram, the airport train.(...) Putting in new rails has become a *nightmare* for transportation companies. The technology becomes more and more complex and the trial periods longer and longer. The companies do not dare to put the cars into service before they are sure that everything works [the mistake at the green line taught everybody to be cautious]. Both the rapid tram and the airport train were delayed for just that reason. Time after time one discovers that the technology is much more complex than expected. (...) It does not help that the best companies in the world, such as Siemens, Ansaldo, or Adtranz produce it. Siemens has tried the same system that was to be used on the green line first in Germany, and it had worked there, but not here. (...) Why is this so? Is it not possible to avoid all this? Bo Peterson (...) believes that the competition between the system producers is the *villain of the piece*. Everybody promises very short delivery periods; otherwise they don't get the contract. The promises are untenable. The producers are willing to pay the fines in order not to lose the contract. – Stockholm is not alone in this. Copenhagen's subway has the same problems, and so have the rapid trams in Oslo and in Zurich. (...) I was on the automatic subway train in Docklands in London to celebrate their 10-year jubilee. The train stopped twice.

A scientist more dramatic than the journalists, but at least it is clear that it is not the technical problems that differentiate Stockholm from Rome. The habits of the users are different, and so is the tone of the public debate, including the press. The studies of European politics and public administration reveal the signs of convergence. While Putnam (1993) claims that Italian politics approach closer and closer the European "norm", that is, become more consensual, the Stockholm councilors claim that Swedish politics approach closer and closer the European "norm", that is, become more confrontational (Czarniawska 1999).

The Roman traffic is therefore not only a transportation system, but also a magnificent public drama, among other public dramas, just like those on the TV-screen.

the time of the fire in the subway, the press dramatized the neonazism and the lack of racial integration in Sweden.

And just like on the TV-screen, the most popular dramas are series, which are long, survive its main actors and produce as many problems as they resolve.

I have borrowed the metaphor of "soap opera" from the media, but I have used it before, pointing out the similarity between the TV-series and the developments in public administration (Czarniawska, 1997). One could say that art imitates life, but also that collective life imitates the forms learned via popular art. While private companies model their conduct on action series, soap operas are the genre of the public sector. Each installment solves some problems and creates many other, and series survive their actors.

Does Organizing Require Facts or Metaphors?

As I said before, I do not intend to criticize the media; I am interested in the role that the press actually performs in the organizing of the traffic in Rome. The researchers, like journalists, use tropes and simplify. But the ends are different, and therefore also the means. Research on organizing, at least in the form I prefer, concentrates not on actors but on collective actions. It is not that people are not important, or that there are no heroes and villains in organizing. It is just that in order to understand organizing it is not enough to understand the actors. Neither Sir John Gielguld nor Sir Laurence Olivier hold the key to understanding Shakespeare; nor is this key to be found in Shakespeare's biography. The CEOs of ATAC, for example, changed four times in recent years, but the traffic in Rome continued to (mal)function. The actions of the media make part of the complex action net that constitutes the traffic in Rome, and as such deserve our attention.

The story of tram No. 8 is but one example of a battle that takes place in all contemporary big cities, a battle not yet studied enough: the battle between various parties, including the city authorities and the media, for the right to represent the city⁵. Whose representation has the right of way in this traffic of images? Which is "true"? Which is legitimate? Which wins and for how long?

For any audience (...) an account is an interpretation of an interpretation. An adequate analysis would see it as a moment in a complex chain of interpretations, each phase of the process anticipating later interpretations and helping to shape them. Ambiguity and subjectivity are neither deviations nor pathologies in news dissemination; they constitute the political world. (Edelman, 1988, p.95)

A representation of the events taking place in a city may be expressed in many media: photographs, pictures, films, novels, but most obviously through official documents, scientific reports, and the mass media. While the first type of representations has the license to recur to imagination, the second should be based on facts. But what counts as facts? There are at least two answers to that question. One is based in the correspondence theory of truth, where facts are utterances that correspond (preferably in 1:1 relation) to the reality (knowable, presumably, beyond the utterances). The other is based in the pragmatist theory of truth, where *facts are utterances expressing collective experience in a manner that does not produce too many protestations* (Rorty, 1991). In any case, as the etymology of the word indicates, the facts must be produced (Knorr Cetina, 1994), and the mode of their production is the key to their credibility. The sociologists of science showed us in detail how scientific facts are produced (Knorr Cetina, 1981, Latour

⁵ I am using the term "representation" in its political sense, which to me is central (see Latour, 1999, on different way of understanding representation).

and Woolgar, 1986). The production of the facts, according to the forensic model of science (Douglas, 1986), depends on producing witnesses and proofs, checked by the procedures of validation, mostly that of repetition. The journalists produce facts through a procedure that is weak version of the one used in history: the sources are the witnesses and the documents, which are validated through confrontations with the opposing version of the events. The social sciences live in the world in between, mixing ad hoc the methods of validation from natural sciences and from history.

City managers in all big cities I studied: Warsaw, Stockholm and Rome had the same wish: to be correctly represented in the media, with both successes and failures, and with a strong presence. But only the managers in Warsaw, wiser by their peculiar experience, knew under what circumstances such dream can come true. One of the top managers of the metro construction company in Warsaw told me, with a strong dose of irony (Czarniawska, 2000):

We used to have a press representative in old time when the contacts with the press were different, when the TV made everybody watch the beautiful crops collected in the camps golden with the sun that never set down, the tons of concrete flowing from concrete plants and the rivers of steel from the steel plants. This was the propaganda of success: so many houses built, so many tons of concrete poured in. But now nobody is interested in this type of news. Just watch the US TV: the catastrophes, the floods, people saved from the fire, that's what you see everyday. The successes are discussed in another context, in educational or technical programs.

The media in the democracies dramatize, metaphorize, exaggerate, and create a spectacle. It is in this context that the full meaning of the Aristotelian notion of "catastrophe" comes to light – not necessarily a disaster, but whichever resolution of the

narrative tension, without which no story is interesting. Therefore the dream of "reforming" the media is not realistic, at least not when one is otherwise occupied, for example with a project of such imperial proportions like the restructuring of the traffic in Rome. The Roman city authorities could wish, and try for, a situation like the one in Stockholm instead – less presence in the media, at least until the most urgent difficulties are resolved.

But the opposite tendency is very clear, the irresistible temptation to use the traffic as a stage for the grand dramas. Indeed, traffic is utilizable for this purpose better than any other area because of the attention paid to it by everybody in the city. The battles fought inside the walls of Campidoglio where the City Council resides are not equally attractive, but this attraction, profitable in political terms, is very costly when a technical innovation is to be introduced. To whoever falls the victory, it is the victory of Pyrrhus, but this time the Romans are in the place of Epirusians.

A Burden of the "Crocean Inheritance" ?

The "metaphorical overkill" is not a phenomenon limited to the admittedly dramatic event of restructuring the traffic in the capital of Italy. Studying the formation of new universities in Italy (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998), we encountered an annual report that was introduced by the Rector (vice-chancellor) of Southern Italian University (SIU), professor in classics, who employed an ode in Latin. We was enchanted, while our interlocutors, the University faculty members, were mostly derisive. Here is a (short!) excerpt from a speech given by the President at the celebration of the 30th

anniversary of SIU's existence. He adopted as a motto a variation of a biblical phrase (*Digitus Dei est hic*): *Digitus Dei et Populi est hic*.⁶

Not to appear more rhetorical than the irrepressible indulgence of a literary passion would permit, it is necessary to explain this double presence in the spirit and life of our University, God and the People, not as separate entities, but as determining entities, as living forces present and presiding over the act of birth of SIU. This can be traced back (...) to the constitution of the Regional University Council. This was created with a promptness which now might seem portentous if we did not know that it resulted from an act of a deep faith on the part of 88 of 94 municipalities which at that time constituted the Grovio Region....

This was the answer of the Region of Grovio – of the common people of the Region of Grovio, to use an expression dear to the President of our Republic – to the historical developments and the reawakening awareness of the dramatic revival of the issue of the South, following the reconquest of freedom and the reconstruction of the country already far advanced. ... At the time, the Region of Grovio seemed to be excluded from this renewal movement, which will most certainly acquire a non-illusory historical function, but which – as revealed by subsequent and especially current experiences – proved to be not completely in tune with the nature of the social tissue and structure of the anthropological and geographical environment. However, those who believe in the not always ascertainable providentiality of history, even as revealed in facts which appear contradictory and inexplicable, know well that choices made by a people, when not coerced by ideological prejudices and by an erroneous evaluation of the science of the possible as represented by politics and economics – that these choices are always profoundly consonant with the innermost soul of the very people who express it, gathered around the traditions of the religious and spiritual culture at its heart. (...)

⁶ "Celebration of the 30th Anniversary", the President's introduction to the SIU Yearly Book, 1986/1987.

We were rather impressed by the Rector's qualities as an orator and wished that officials in Sweden could at least sometimes reach a similar level. It was difficult for us to understand the hostility towards it revealed by our interlocutors from science faculties. To them, however, the speech was an illustration of a characteristic rhetoric, typical of the "humanist mentality," which prevented the University from modernizing. The professors so complained about their students:

Their scientific development is a product of their previous education, and of the environment in which they grew up, an environment in which the humanities carry enormous weight and the sciences almost none, because even the high schools are resonant with humanistic influences. When they leave school to enter university, they have already been formed in a predominantly humanistic mold. And this means that their way of thinking, their ideological attitude, their perception of the world are all humanistic.

- But what is the difference between the scientific and humanistic mentalities you are talking about?

- The scientific mentality examines a series of facts and acts accordingly. The humanistic mentality does not take facts into consideration. Instead it takes its own philosophical ideology as given, and acts accordingly. (Sciences 1)

The professors from the humanities agreed that there were two mentalities, or two cultures.

The tradition of Italian studies is strongly humanist, especially in the southern areas where there was never any economic and industrial structure of the kind that appreciates scientific culture. (...) Only the humanist culture, philosophy and such, was worthy the name of culture; it was the only true culture. It is an old Italian tradition that can be traced back to the Fascist Minister of Education, Gentile, who reformed the school system and gave it a strong historical-humanist base, with its roots in the neo-idealist philosophy that had been predominant since the twenties. But here in the South it survived well into the seventies. The high school teachers

of philosophy and history were all idealists, all Croceanists.⁷ So that when our colleagues, the physicists and the mathematicians, arrived, they were determined to carry out a thoroughgoing modernization program. Their analysis of the situation was more or less as follows: this zone is asleep, it is culturally retarded, and steeped in nepotism and so on. So, what is needed is modernization in both the moral and the cultural sense. This was a colonial mentality, at least as the locals perceived it. (Letters 1)

The colonizers, equipped with facts, and the natives, equipped with metaphors. In our (originally Polish and German) romantic hearts, we were of course on the side of the natives, and on the side of the metaphors. This was before we started to read the interview material, and discovered that it had to be literally cleansed of metaphors before it made sense. A typical paragraph of an interview could run like this:

The University started as an *alien body*, then it became a *forgotten body*, then in the period of student unrest it became a *provocative body*, a *destructive body* – but it has made an impact on the local community on both the social and cultural planes. But then this *spirit burnt itself out* and it turned into an organization like any other, slightly more prestigious, slightly more dynamic and therefore more visible. In recent years it has created an impression of moving very fast, but on a trajectory that often conflicted rather than coincided with the local logic. And so it became once again an *alien body* – this time an *astral body*, which now provokes not intolerance but suspicion. . . (Arts 1).

I do not think that it was by mere chance that, in the first elaboration of the material, we used the metaphor of transplantation, seeking refuge in science. But

⁷ Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), Italian philosopher who combined and developed the ideas of Hegel and Vico. A friend of Giovanni Gentile until the latter's espousal of Nazism. After the war, the leader of the Liberal Party (*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1995, p.170).

only later did I understand that metaphors could be an obstruction not only in organizing a text but also in organizing anything at all.

Is Croce, therefore, the one to be blamed (or praised, depending on the orientation) for the over-metaphorization of the Italian organizational discourse? It must be pointed out that when our interlocutors spoke about "Crocean tradition" they evoked a popular vision of what this tradition was: anti-positivist, favoring humanities over natural sciences. History was not a science, since "science deals with laws and generalities while history deals with individual fact. As cognition of the individual, history comes under the general category of art, but it is a special kind of art because it provides knowledge of actuality, whereas pure art only gives knowledge of possibility" (Orsini, 1961:15). This is hardly surprising to any reader familiar with Vico or Dilthey, and indeed many a social constructivist would easily agree with such a statement even today. What is more, Croce saw scientific concepts as "logical fictions produced for practical convenience" (ibid.: 18; compare with Knorr Cetina, 1994). According to Croce, while natural sciences dealt with fictions and abstractions, the actual reality could only be reached by individual cognition, or historical knowledge.

It is therefore easy to understand that natural scientists were as wary of Croce as they now are of sociologists of science, but was Croce guilty of inciting to a metaphor abuse? This is an interesting point, and I rely on Gian Orsini on its correctness. In brief, Croce's view on rhetorical analysis in literary criticism was similar to that of Solow's on the same in economics: the sole listing of rhetorical figures in use, even strengthened by an exclamation marks (he ridiculed his own early comment on Dante: "Admirable hypotyposis!", Orsini, 1961:82) is absurd. But here similarities end and Croce's idiosyncrasy begins:

In scientific discourse there are such words as metaphors and proper terms. . . . But in aesthetic expression there are only proper words, and the same intuition can be expressed in one way only, just because it is an intuition and not a concept (quoted in Orsini, 1961: 83).

Thus Croce's view anticipated the rhetorical turn in social sciences (although he would not count history among them) but refused it a proper place in aesthetics, which, however, is not under discussion here. Would Croce, if he could be bothered, condemn or praise the metaphorization of the tram number eight?

In his famous *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* that popularized the genre of historical anthropology, Carlo Ginzburg thus characterized the language used by Menocchio the miller in his answers to the Inquisitors:

To make the blood of Menocchio's profound thoughts run afresh for us, we need to break the crust of this [Christian, neoplatonist, scholastic] terminology (...) It is necessary to depart from the most striking element of Menocchio's language: its metaphorical density. (...) In his mental and linguistic universe, marked by the most absolute literalness, even metaphors are taken strictly literally. Their contents, never fortuitous, reveal the plot of the actual, and unexpressed, discourse of Menocchio (Ginzburg, 1976:73, translation BC).

Striking in this quote is the "metaphorical density" not only of Menocchio's, but also of Ginzburg's discourse. And although the latter is obviously far from being "strictly literal", to the point that it can be suspected of a intentional production of an echo-like effect, "the fresh blood coming from under the crust of scholastic discourse" indicates

the continuing link of rhetorical tradition that joins Menocchio, Croce, Ginzburg and the Roman journalists of 1998. It could be postulated that the "overuse" of metaphors comes from a combination of two opposing beliefs that double the same effect. The use of metaphors is legitimate both to those who see them as tropes, like Ginzburg and the journalists, and those who see them as "proper" expressions of a deep intuition, like Menocchio and the poets – in Croce's view. Treated with suspicion by the fact-seekers within the Anglo-Saxon discourse, metaphors are given a free way in the Italian discourse independently of the way "facts" are defined and situated.

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