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Perception and Organizing: Beyond the Text

Introduction

In this final chapter some lingering questions will be brought back into discussion and some concluding remarks will be articulated. The dominant idea pursued in this book is that instead of following what has been called the linguistic turn in philosophy and the social sciences to the bitter end and conceiving of social reality, including organization, organizing and managerial practices, as being exclusively linguistic in nature, one should take into account and recognize the concept of perception, that is, humans’ sensual relationship with the external world – most notably vision and audible capacities – and emphasize that perception also plays a central role for organization. Human beings not only rely on their cognitive capacities to orient themselves in everyday life; they also see, hear, smell, touch and taste their way through social life and this human condition is, it is argued here, not sufficiently attended to in the organization literature. The other main idea discussed is that human perception is a situated and contingent capacity, embedded in new orientations in philosophy and scientific research interests in the nineteenth century. This fascinating period of time – the formative years of modern, urban life, if you will – was also the period where organization theory and managerial concerns was first clearly articulated. In a number of places in this text, an unambiguous causal linearity between these two events has been rejected or at least rendered problematic. The relationship between the two events can be a source of speculation and investigation elsewhere; here their temporal proximity is noted. The three preceding chapters have examined art, music and media, and have sought to present these domains of investigation and research as highly complex domains integrating various disciplinary perspectives and theoretical orientations. However, in their own idiosyncratic ways, these concepts
influence perception in organization through their capacity to exploit human attention. ‘Art, music, media’ are then organizational resources that deserve to be examined not as marginal or decorative social resources (as in the arts and music) or black-boxed and naturalized infrastructures (as in the case of media). Human beings inhabit a world where art and images, music and sounds, media and technologies of representation constantly intervene in their existence. Perception is not what is complementary or additional to day-to-day workings in organizations, but operates throughout everyday life in organizations.

Beyond the text: Text versus image?

One lingering concern when operating with dual categories such as text/nontext (i.e. image, sound, etc.) is how to understand such a distinction, the very separation between text and image: what does it mean to say that something is non-text? Can texts be understood without images? For instance, in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), an image of the referent serves as the signified that the signifier denotes. The entire sign (that is, in the commonplace formula Sign = Signifier/Signified) is thus incomprehensible without images of referents. Needless to say, the relationship between text and image is part of the *philosophia perennis* and a major aporia in philosophy. Still, a theorist like Vilém Flusser (2000; 2002) (discussed in Chapter 2) provides some interesting ideas regarding the relationship between text and image. Speaking of photography, Flusser (1983/2000: 7) outlines two major human inventions, that of ‘the invention of linear writing’ and that of ‘the invention of technical images’ (e.g. photography in the nineteenth century). Prior to the invention of linear writing, humans had recourse to images to communicate. Images are, Flusser (1983/2000: 8) argues, of necessity ‘connotative’; they are ambiguous complexes of symbols and are therefore ‘spaces open for interpretation’. Elsewhere Flusser (2002: 15) speaks of ‘three forms of communication’: ‘those that order the symbols in linear sequences (the diachronical ones); those that order them in surfaces (the plain synchronic ones); and those that order them in space (the tridimensional synchronical ones)’. Spoken languages and the alphabet are of the first type; Chinese writings and paintings of the second type; theatre and architecture are of the third type. For Flusser (2002), the three types can be variously combined. For instance, television is ‘a complex combination of diachronicity and plain synchronicity’. Flusser (2002: 22) distinguishes more generally between *linear codes* and *surface codes* and suggests that the former are becoming less important for most people.