

BOOK + MEDIA REVIEW

Becoming Imperceptible in a World that Discerns to Award. Reading Bob Dylan's Nobelization with *A Thousand Plateaus*

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Book: Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1980). *Mille plateaux (Capitalisme et schizophrénie, Vol. 2)*. Éditions de Minuit. English translation: Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus. Capitalism and schizophrenia* (trans. B. Massumi). University of Minnesota Press.

Medium: the media process of Bob Dylan's Nobelization (October 2016–June 2017)

Discerner (to discern) and *décerner* (to award) share a single Latin root in French, *cernere*, meaning to sift, to separate, to distinguish, and to decide. Where discerning designates the perceptual and cognitive operation that tells apart what remains confused or uncertain, awarding seals the decision taken at the end of that prior operation. Put differently, before an organization can award a distinction, it must first carry out a work of discernment. An award ceremony is, in this respect, a tried and tested machine of discernment. It separates a laureate from the mass of contenders, names them, announces them, summons them, exposes them, and rewards them according to a protocol meticulously planned a priori. Nothing would seem more foreign to the indiscernible than this kind of device, devoted to making merits distinct, identities assignable, and moments datable. Yet, it is precisely on this terrain that a remarkable experiment in indiscernibility played out between October 2016 and June 2017. In awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan, the Swedish Academy did not know that it was embarking on an unprecedented experience: that of an institution, among the most ritualized in the world, forced to reorganize itself live in the face of a laureate who slipped away from every category meant to circumscribe him. The Dylan case is intriguing, then, because it introduces indiscernibility into a context designed to eliminate it.

Our *Book + Media review* therefore proposes to reflect on this experience by bringing the philosophical work *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) into dialogue with

the media process of Dylan's Nobelization; the latter being distributed across an official press release, silences commented upon live, indignant editorials, a ceremony relayed through an international broadcast feed, and speeches delivered in public or recorded. This plurality of media productions does not constitute a single work, but is the very medium of this review, which documents that Nobelization (see Table 1).

This choice stems from the very nature of prize-givings, which Dayan and Katz (1992) label *media events*: ceremonies designed for live broadcast, which interrupt the ordinary flow of programming and gather dispersed audiences around a momentarily sacralized center. Dylan's Nobelization multiplies the media event. Not only the ceremony of 10 December but also the entire process, silences included, unfolded in and through the media, each absence of response from the laureate immediately becoming a news event.

Beyond this singular episode, this review argues that situations of indiscernibility provide a unique vantage point for understanding how organizations continue to function when the devices they rely upon cease to discern what they wish to award. In bringing *A Thousand Plateaus* into dialogue with Dylan's Nobelization, our purpose is not only to reread a cultural event in the light of a philosophy but also to explore what their confrontation reveals about the processes of categorization, resistance, and organizational transformation that are of direct interest to scholars in organization theory and strategic management.

The book *A Thousand Plateaus: A micropolitics of discernment and its lines of flight*

The second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *A Thousand Plateaus* was published in 1980, and itself plays with the legitimate expectations of a reader. The chapters are not arranged in any particular order and do not suggest any conclusion. Instead, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari present 15 'plateaus', inviting

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Table 1. The Nobelization process across a plurality of media productions

Chronology	Associated media support
13 October 2016	Official press release of the Swedish Academy
13–28 October 2016	Media coverage of Dylan's (absence of) reaction
10 December 2016	Broadcast of the Nobel ceremony
1 and 2 April 2017	Private meeting narrated by Sara Danius
5 June 2017	Public release of the Nobel lecture on YouTube

Source: Own elaboration.

readers to explore the work in any order they choose. Nor does the book set forth a theory of organization; rather, it provides those who study organizations with a relevant toolkit.

Its use in management theory is, moreover, no longer marginal. The notions of multiplicity, virtuality, and assemblage have durably irrigated the analysis of organizations (Linstead & Thanem, 2007), and process approaches have made *becoming* an important concept, organization being reinterpreted as the always precarious accomplishment of a flow of changes (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Yet, the concepts of segmentarity and of zones of indiscernibility, developed in two plateaus and among the most directly organizational in the book, remain among the least mobilized by the field.

Plateau nine, 'Micropolitics and Segmentarity', starts from an anthropological observation, namely, the assumption that every society, and by extension every organization, segments individuals. *Binary* segmentarity distributes beings into dichotomous classes, defining as precisely as possible what things and people are and are not. The second form of segmentarity, known as *circular*, organizes space into circles around a center, establishing proximities and peripheries. The final form, *linear* segmentarity, divides time and action into successive segments, procedures, episodes, and stages, each of which leads to the next.

Deleuze and Guattari further distinguish between two forms of implementation of these segmentarities. One, known as 'rigid' or 'molar', is strictly imposed regardless of the situation; and the other, known as 'supple' or 'molecular', consists of adapting them to specific contexts. Organizations operate on this dual level: affects run beneath organizational charts, becoming unfolds beneath procedures, and the solidity of the molar always depends on its molecular counterpart.

The second plateau, number 10, 'Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...', deploys the notion of a *zone of indiscernibility*. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is neither imitating, nor evolving, nor 'finding oneself', but rather encountering otherness in such close proximity that one can no longer draw a clear boundary between two terms. *Becoming-imperceptible* is its ultimate form and consists of an abstract line that combines with other lines to form a world, much like a chameleon that blends in with the colors of its natural environment to the point of becoming indistinguishable from it. Indiscernibility is therefore not a

passive confusion but an art, an active way of evading the apparatuses of capture without confronting them.

For the reader in management studies, the interest of this conceptual pair is twofold. On the one hand, segmentarity provides a finer grammar than the notion of institution alone, since it describes how the *who*, the *when*, and the *where* of an organized device are divided, hierarchized, and held together. On the other hand, the zone of indiscernibility designates what happens to these divisions when an element refuses to let itself be circumscribed, or enclosed, without, however, directly challenging them. This is exactly the scenario that Dylan's Nobelization played out in the public square.

Chronicle of a disrupted Nobelization

The Nobel ritual articulates the three segmentarities adequately. *Binary* segmentarity appears in the way the Swedish Academy defines what a laureate is and is not, what a Nobel lecture, and a banquet or a legitimate interlocutor is. *Linear* segmentarity organizes the stages of the Nobelization process, in which the selection of the laureate, the public announcement, the thanks and confirmation of attendance, the ceremony of 10 December at which the king of Sweden hands over the medal and the diploma, the Nobel lecture, the banquet, and finally the payment of the 8 million kronor follow one another. *Circular* segmentarity distributes the elements between the center and the periphery, with everything converging on Stockholm, the concert hall for the ceremony, the city hall for the banquet, and the Academy at the center of the device. These three divisions reinforce one another; and since 1901, with rare exceptions, the machine has run without a hitch. Absent laureates had justifications, such as illness or an explicit political refusal like Sartre's in 1964, which the Academy could handle without structural damage because they still fell within available operations of discernment: one knew how to classify a refusal, an impediment, and a protest. What one did not know how to classify, by contrast, was what happened in October 2016.

On 13 October 2016, the Academy announced that its Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Bob Dylan 'for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition' (Svenska Akademien, 2016). That very evening, Dylan gave a concert in Las Vegas and did not say a word about the news to his audience. The days passed without his answering either the calls of Sara Danius, the Academy's permanent secretary, or requests made to his entourage. His official website briefly mentioned the title of laureate on a promotional page, but that same mention was removed roughly 24 h later (The Guardian, 2016). The institution, accustomed to orchestrating public speech, then began to speak in scattered order. The academician Per Wästberg publicly qualified Dylan's silence as 'impolite and arrogant' (AFP, 2016), while other members played for time and sought to put the situation into perspective.

It was not until 28 October that Dylan finally called Danius back for a conversation described as warm, accepting the prize and confiding to a journalist his amazement, without, however, committing himself to coming to Stockholm (Gundersen, 2016). A response that ought to have been obtained within minutes thus stretched over 15 days.

In November, Dylan announced that he would not attend the ceremony of 10 December, invoking prior engagements. The ceremony nonetheless took place, and the laureate was represented in two ways. First by Patti Smith, who performed *A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall*, and then by Azita Raji, the United States ambassador to Sweden, who read a speech of thanks written by Dylan himself, as the Academy officially attests (Dylan, 2016). The actual presentation of the medal and diploma, which had still not taken place, would not occur until 01 April 2017. Taking advantage of two concerts given by Dylan in Stockholm as part of his *Never Ending Tour*, the Academy obtained a meeting, but on the laureate's terms, in the form of a private ceremony, without cameras or journalists, in an undisclosed location adjoining the hall where he was to perform that same evening, and in the presence of 12 academicians (France 24, 2017). Danius reported on it the following day on her blog, in a disarmingly simple tone: 'the mood was excellent. We drank champagne' (Svenska Dagbladet, 2017).

The final requirement was the Nobel *lecture*, the regulatory condition for the payment of the prize, to be delivered within the 6 months following the official ceremony. Dylan complied at the very last minute, sharing on 05 June 2017 with the Academy, but also with the whole world via YouTube (Nobel Prize, 2017), an audio recording of some 27 min in which, over a piano background, he evokes three books from his youth: *Moby-Dick*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the *Odyssey*. Beyond a form already far removed from the classic speech, this recording would prove shocking because more than a dozen sentences devoted to *Moby-Dick* bear a strange resemblance to the summary of the novel published by SparkNotes, an on-line study-aid site, down to a quotation attributed to Melville that figures nowhere in the text of the novel (Blistein, 2017). Down to its final segment, then, the imposed exercise will have been rendered indiscernible: subjective interpretation or collage, tribute or mockery, a text by Dylan or a text by 'no one'.

Cross-reading: What the indiscernible does to the organization of discernment

When read in light of *A Thousand Plateaus* and the notion of indiscernibility, it becomes clear that Dylan never contested the prize, nor the Academy, nor the ritual. What he disrupted, sometimes simultaneously, were the three segmentarities that hold them together; blurring the who, when, and the where at once.

Diffraction of the *who*, first of all, since Dylan multiplies himself and withdraws at the same time. He communicates

via his website for the course of a day, through his entourage, through the voice of Patti Smith, through that of the United States ambassador to Sweden, and then, finally, through the intermediary of a recorded voice. This generalized ventriloquism, which describes the way figures speak through us and we through them (Cooren, 2012), makes it difficult to know who is accepting, who is thanking, and who is present. The figure of the laureate, which the binary segmentarity of the ritual supposes to be single, embodied, and identifiable, is diffracted into a constellation of spokespersons and, in Dylan's case, contaminates the institution itself. The Academy, whose voice is supposedly single and collegial, in turn fragments into discordant statements debated in the public sphere, ranging from Wästberg's irritation to Danius's diplomacy.

Diffraction of the *when*, next, where linear segmentarity supposes dated segments following one another in cadence. Thus, the response is spread out over 15 days, the medal ceremony is postponed by nearly 4 months, and the lecture is 'delivered' on the eve of the deadline. No stage is omitted, but all are stretched out, shifted, and rendered unrecognizable.

Diffraction of the *where*, finally, where the center of circular segmentarity, Stockholm and its official venues, is first neglected and then subverted. The official stage hosts Dylan's avatars, tasked with conveying his song and his speech, while the actual award ceremony takes place in an anonymous hotel lounge, away from the cameras, in the shadow of a concert, and Dylan's speech is recorded in Los Angeles; that is, thousands of kilometers from the place supposed to crown it. The *where* thus retains certain of its properties while undergoing continuous deformations that exceed the institution's capacity to fully know and control the event.

It is important to emphasize that this threefold disruption did not destroy anything but was, on the contrary, productive. Dylan's absence functioned according to what Giovannoni and Quattrone (2018) call the materiality of absence. Just as the incompleteness of Siena Cathedral sustained a continuous search for solutions over centuries, the void left by the laureate gave rise to a cascade of organizational inventions: a speech read by proxy, a private ceremony improvised from scratch, and an audio lecture accepted as a legitimate form. Even silence constituted an organizational event in its own right, a productive 'nothing' (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019). The Dylan 'non-event', through his deferred response, his diffracted presence, and his ventriloquized speech engendered new ways of organizing. The Academy entered, in spite of itself, into a zone of indiscernibility, compelled to soften its rigid segments, improvise unprecedented protocols, and admit that a Nobel lecture might be an audio/video file and a ceremony a glass of champagne without witnesses. In Deleuzian vocabulary, rigid segmentarity had to mobilize its supple counterpart for the ritual to survive. In other words, it is the Nobel institution that began to become.

Contributions to management studies

While *A Thousand Plateaus* has so far allowed us to discuss Dylan's Nobelization, the following discussion attempts to reverse this perspective by examining what this cross-reading contributes, in turn, to contemporary managerial issues. For management theory, the study of indiscernibility offers a novel perspective for analyzing the way actors react in the face of machines of discernment. It allows these dynamics to be understood through what Deleuze and Guattari call 'apparatuses of capture', illuminating both the moments when individuals let themselves be seized by such devices and those when they choose to resist them.

The sociology of prizes and awards is the first theoretical perspective that this review invites us to examine. Viewed through the lens of the three forms of segmentation proposed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, an awards ceremony appears less as a simple mechanism of evaluation than as an apparatus of discernment designed to produce and stabilize categories.

In foundational work in management studies, award ceremonies are precisely defined as field-configuring rituals. The Grammy Awards periodically organize the music industry (Anand & Watson, 2004), the Booker Prize structures the categories of anglophone fiction (Anand & Jones, 2008), and the economy of prestige ensures the regulated conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital (English, 2005). These analyses tacitly assume the cooperation of the laureate, a consenting link in the device whose presence comes to close the ritual loop. Our cross-reading challenges this assumption, for by becoming indiscernible, that is, by destabilizing the segmentations that allow the apparatus to function, Dylan does not reject the ritual but forces it to reconfigure itself: the actors redistribute themselves, and temporalities expand. The literature on awards would benefit from incorporating this constitutive vulnerability, which is also a theoretical resource, for it is when the ritual breaks down that it reveals what holds it together; ceremonies do not merely stabilize their categories but reproduce them by keeping open the very conditions for their possible reconfiguration.

Studies of resistance within and around organizations also encounter, through our cross-referenced review, a concept that remains largely underdeveloped. For Deleuze and Guattari, indiscernibility does not consist in opposing the apparatus, nor in withdrawing from it or disappearing from it, but in moving within a territory where categories cease to produce the expected effects. Dylan never refused the award but accepted it, cashed the check, and even said he was honored by it. What he refused was to be where, when, and how the institution demanded he be. Between speaking out and defection, this indistinguishability charts a third path of generative evasion that the literature on productive resistance (Courpasson et al., 2012) or on social 'nothingness' (Scott, 2022) is only just beginning to grasp. At a time when organizations are intensifying

their regimes of visibility, evaluation, and traceability, this figure sheds light on the everyday practices of employees who resist metrics, professionals who adhere to the letter of evaluation systems while undermining their spirit, and collectives that prefer camouflage to confrontation. Without breaking ties with the organization in which it operates, indiscernibility thus emerges as a micropolitical resource for resistance, though, in Dylan's case, with a specific condition of possibility that the case brings to light: namely, massive symbolic capital, as Dylan is a world-renowned and recognized artist, making his replacement or exclusion from the process costly to enforce. Any theory of organizational 'evasion' must consider both the loosening of segmentations and the unequally distributed resources of those who manipulate them.

Finally, the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari between molar and molecular segmentarities (in our case, the difference between how an event must unfold according to established procedures that organize collective action and how it unfolds through adjustments and variations that allow it to continue functioning in the face of the unexpected) invites us to reexamine neo-institutional theory from an alternative theoretical perspective. Dylan's Nobel Prize win reveals constancy achieved through deformation, insofar as the molar properties of the Nobel ritual were preserved precisely because the process was rendered unrecognizable, with each segment having been honored through a series of molecular adjustments that no one, neither the Academy nor the commentators, could have specified in advance. This dynamic resonates both with the work of institutional maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), which is associated with the scrupulous repetition of rituals, such as the gala dinners at Cambridge colleges (Dacin et al., 2010), and with a more process-oriented conception of institutions (see Meyer, 2019), which emphasizes that institutions transform through practical adjustments devised by actors in response to unprecedented situations (Smets et al., 2012); institutional maintenance thus appears less as the faithful reproduction of a ritual than as an organization's ability to preserve its molar properties through a multiplicity of molecular adjustments.

This interpretation, however, has its limitations. Dylan's indiscernibility could be seen as a deliberate management of his image, an image that, since the 1960s, has been at the heart of his artistic brand. Moreover, the Academy was not merely a passive participant in the episode, as rarely has a Nobel Prize in Literature generated so much global attention. And much like the Streisand effect,¹ the scandal may even have benefited the institution as much as it troubled it. Should we, then, decide whether this represents a new direction or mere star caprice?

¹ The Streisand effect designates a phenomenon whereby the attempt to conceal a piece of information leads to its dissemination and multiplies the media attention paid to it (see Jansen & Martin, 2015).

We do not think so, and this is precisely where the productive tension lies, in the impossibility of distinguishing between these two interpretations, an impossibility that itself constitutes a zone of indiscernibility and confirms the concept's fruitfulness rather than weakening it. A resistance fighter who can be reduced and categorized as a strategist or a tactician is already no longer indiscernible.

Conclusion

In an imagined dialogue that Mangold attributes to Dylan in the film *A Complete Unknown* (2025), Dylan reminds his girlfriend Sylvie that a person is not 'found' the way one might find a shoe. They simply transform into something different and not, as his interlocutor would have it, into something better: The indiscernible does not linearly produce something better, but it generates incessant alterities that cannot be grasped by pre-existing scales of evaluation. It forces organizations that encounter it, such as the Swedish Academy in 2016, to invent new modes of interaction. And it is precisely because they attempt to maintain continuity in their interactions that this encounter is productive. The indiscernible compels the organization, too, to transform itself into something different. Finally, the indiscernible poses a highly relevant question to management researchers: what becomes of our organizations, saturated with metrics, when what they claim to evaluate simply begins to become?

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