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# Connecting Strategic Practices, Regionality and Institution: A Ventriloquism Perspective on Creativity in Agencies

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**Abstract**. When it comes to establishing or maintaining an organization, the choice of region is a key strategic factor. This is even truer for creative organizations, whose social capital is based on the presence of innovative clusters (Delgado, Porter & Stern, 2010; Porter, 2007), a "creative class" (Florida, 2003; Pratt, 2008), and a network that helps establish its value and spur its creative production (Simon, 2009). In this article, I set out to demonstrate the interdependence between the effects of a "region," understood as acting *in* and *through* the discourse of employees, and the macro-institutional (Vaara & Whittington, 2012) effects of the cult of creativity in the advertising industry. Drawing on two case studies within two respective advertising agencies in outlying regions (SAORs), and based on the approach of the constitutive role of communication in organizations (Cooren & Robichaud, 2011; Cooren, 2015; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2015; Putnam & Nicotera, 2008) and more specifically the premise of ventriloquism (Cooren, 2013), the article shows how certain cultural figures produce strategic practices to counter the effects of the region, whereas others cause the agency to tend toward an institutionalized ideal of advertising creativity. In doing so, the article will demonstrate how observing *what is done against the name of this region* already reveals practices that push a (creative) organization in a given direction, bringing into play strategic orientations of becoming that must be taken into account in order to avoid undermining creativity. The article responds to a call for a conceptualization of institutionalized constitutive effects as they are ventriloquized in strategic practice (Jarzabkowski, Burke & Spee, 2015; Smets, Greenwood & Lounsbury, 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), but in relation to regionality, which has rarely been explored in strategy as practice (SAP) approaches.

**Keywords**: strategic practices, regionality, advertising agencies, creativity, ventriloquism

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a given that regions shape the collective actions of their creative organizations. As such, research on creative industries has looked into the conditions favorable to the emergence of creative classes (Florida, 2003), of creative clusters (Delgado, et al., 2010; Porter, 2007), or of cities with creative potential, often in socio-economic and socio-political terms (Bouquillon, Miège & Moeglin, 2015; Flew, 2011; Nicolas, 2012). The choice to establish an enterprise in a given city, whether deliberate or not, invariably takes this potential into account, especially when creativity is the organization's very purpose (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay, 2015; Davis, et

al., 2009; Engel & del-Palacio, 2011; Engel, 2015; O'Connor & Gu, 2014). Since the writings of Hofstede (1983, 1984, 1993) on intercultural management (1983; 1984; 1993), territorial management has been viewed as a resource for becoming established but also as a source of behavioral and motivational determinisms (Laitinen & Suvas, 2016; Rinne, Steel & Fairweather, 2013). More specifically in the advertising industry, although their location is part and parcel of agencies' history—one need only think of New York's mythical Madison Avenue, seen by many as the birthplace of advertising creativity (Tungate, 2007)—the issue of "region" as a dimension that influences creativity has attracted little study, with a few scarce exceptions (Hill & Rahim, 1997; Moeran, 2009; Taylor, Hoy & Haley, 1996; West, 1993).

From a strategy as practice (SAP) perspective, a number of authors propose renewing this outlook and conceiving of a place of establishment (Boxenbaum, 2005) and a social environment as constraining or enabling organizational practices and routines (Rouleau, Allard-Poesi & Warnier, 2007; Whittington, 2006), under the influence of the institutions that guide the professional field (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Lawrence, Suddby & Leca, 2011; Sandhu, 2017; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). But how does a region influence the strategic practices associated with managing creative processes and their underlying practices?

To address this micro-macro connection, and to take up the theme of the present journal issue, this article proposes drawing links between the concepts of strategic practices, regionality and the institutionalization of creativity from the standpoint of the constitutive role of communication in organizations (CCO) and more specifically the premise of ventriloquism (Cooren, 2013). I propose a way to read this regionality as an agent *in whose name* (Cooren 2013) certain strategic decisions are made and participate in employees' collective action. Indeed, my intent is to demonstrate that regionality triggers certain strategic practices that are carried out *against the name of* this regionality and that embrace the institutionalized cult of creativity (McFall, 2004; Nixon, 2003).

Accordingly, the article will begin by recalling how both SAP and CCO invite us to conceive of this micro-macro connection, especially in terms of the macro-institutionalization of strategy (Lawrence, et al., 2011; Sandhu, 2017; Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Mayer, Mounoud, Nahapiet & Rouleau, 2003)—a connection that will be applied to constitutive practices in the field of advertising. Next, I will circumscribe the concept of region within a discursive perspective (Philipsen, 1992; Soja, 1996) in order to draw a conceptual link between "regionality" and "organization" based on the premise of ventriloquism (Cooren, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). This way of understanding an organization enables us to examine cultural figures—defined here as that which we animate and which animates us in our conversations and actions—that make a difference in the course of organizing and strategizing.

Following presentation of the methodological design based on an examination of two case studies, the article then looks at how a region influences constitutive dynamics and strategic practices, as observed through five categories of figures that organize two small advertising agencies in outlying regions (SAORs): seclusion, defense, distinctiveness, maturity and expansiveness.

*In fine*, the article proposes conceiving of regionality no longer in strictly socio-economic terms, but rather as something embodied in organizational texts and discourses, thereby both enabling and constraining certain strategic practices of creativity in the two SAORs in question. In doing so the article responds to a call, formulated by Vaara

and Whittington (2012), to observe strategic practice through the interdependence of different organizational actants, including systems, domains and fields (Whittington, 2006), and more specifically, institutions (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2015; Smets, et al., 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). From a management standpoint, I argue that observing *what is done against the name of the region* reveals practices that push a (creative) organization in a given direction, thus indicating strategic orientations of becoming that must be taken into account in order to avoid undermining creativity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF BETWEEN STRATEGIC PRACTICES, INSTITUTION AND REGIONALITY

The theoretical grounding of SAP in practical sociology has helped decouple strategic practices from content—i.e what an organization *has* to give its actions direction—and broadened them to include the social and organizational actions that make the strategy possible—i.e. what organizational actors do to give their activities meaning and direction (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara 2015). By its very nature, SAP has opened up the black box of strategic practice to observe praxis (the activities involved in strategic practice), practitioners themselves, and strategic practices, i.e. he routine activities that allow a strategy to emerge (Golsorkhi, et al., 2015; Rouleau, et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006).

Regarding practices, SAP makes it possible to observe different levels of connection between the intra- and the extra-organizational (Whittington, 2006); actions performed at the individual or organizational level are thus viewed as reproductions of institutionalized practices (Lawrence, et al., 2011) as established by management schools (Whittington, et al., 2003), hence legitimizing certain organizational forms (Sandhu, 2017) and their associated professional actions via such means as charters and codes (de la Broise, 2013), manifests (Soar, 2002), and association directives (Nixon, 2003), On the flip side, however, SAP considers that, owing to their recursiveness, these situated practices also make up the micro-foundations of a field (Lawrence, et al., 2011; Sandhu, 2017), give it stability, and show how a variety of actors and practices can create, alter and maintain these institutions (Smets, et al., 2015 : 13630). However, the way these institutions trickle down and are enacted in everyday practices has been little explored (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2015; Smets, et al., 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Similarly, CCO, since its inception, has approached communication on the firm ground of interactions (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011) and scaled up (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) to institutional positioning effects (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), thus bridging the divide between agent and structure, micro and macro (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; Cooren, 2013; Sandhu, 2017). By arguing that “no organization can maintain itself, evolve and function except by being embodied in the *actions* and *interactions* of its representatives, whether they be official documents, employees, executives, websites or spokespersons” (Cooren & Robichaud, 2011 : 141. My translation; my emphasis), CCO allows us to grasp practices, texts and organizational discourses as actions that “make a difference,” i.e. that impact how a situation unfolds and give a direction to organizing (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). These texts and organizational discourses that make a difference—what Cooren (2006) calls “agents”—are, among other things, made up of institutional directives that shape practices.

> In other words, it is not only the content of communication but also its form that makes a difference. Following communicative constructivism, all communication is ingrained in societal institutions; institutions, in turn, are held in place by communicative action. (Sandhu, 2017 : 2635)

Hence, from a CCO perspective, just as from an SAP perspective, these institutionalized constitutive practices are not suspended in a kind of "structure" waiting to be put into practice within organizations. On the contrary, they become convention from the moment they are reproduced, maintained and cultivated in an organization.

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZED CULT OF CREATIVITY IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY

The institutionalization of advertising, seen in terms of marketing communications agencies' practices, thus results from an intensive legitimization of the trope[1] of creativity. These agencies both embody and reproduce the cult of creation (Nixon 2003). This posture has been achieved by various historical and institutional struggles (Leiss, et al., 1990, 2005) that actors have waged to legitimize themselves as the sole purveyors of creativity (Nixon, 2003), i.e. to show their twofold ability to produce an original reflection on marketing problems and to develop an aesthetic command of medias (Leiss, Klein, Jhally & Botterill, 2005; McFall, 2002, 2004; Nixon, 2003). Agencies defend these skills against those of other intermediaries such as media agencies, public relations firms and consultants (McFall, 2004). The industry has therefore been structured around constitutive practices and institutional processes in the form of professional associations with their codes, charters, qualification requirements and other deontic instruments, as well as manifests (Soar, 2002), competitions (Kilgour, Sasser & Koslow, 2013; Verbeke Franses, Le Blanc & van Ruiten, 2008), standards, training and other professionalizing practices (Baillargeon & David, 2013; McFall, 2004; Nixon, 2003). This renewed assertion of the agency as purveyor of creativity has seen the highest salaries and positions go to creative individuals (Smith & Yang, 2004; Till & Baack, 2005).

Moreover, a whole chain of practitioners (market analysts, media planners, artistic directors, copywriters, graphic designers, programmers, producers, etc.), of praxis (seeking inspiration, producing a sketch, developing arguments, etc.), and of practices (collecting client needs, designing a creative brief, creating mock-ups, delivering client presentations, securing approvals, overseeing implementation, performing evaluation and follow-up, etc.) all support ideation (creativity) as the central activity of an agency (Gaertner, 2007, 2012; Grant & McLeod, 2007; Moeran, 2009). These practices become strategic when they are situated in and recursively influence (make a difference within) a continuum of reaffirming the centrality of creativity in advertising activities. This strategic recursiveness (Lundgren & Blom, 2015) shows what matters to the agency, i.e. that to which it becomes attached—values, principles, theories, ideologies, practices, etc.—so that it can legitimize certain courses of action to the detriment of others (Vásquez, Bencherki, Cooren & Sergi, 2017). This alignment brings into play institutional as well as agency-specific practices.

1. According to Nixon (2003), creativity in itself serves as the justification for a number of phenomena that have nothing to do with the creative act itself; for example, a paycheck may be proportional to an advertisement's creative performance.

Herein lies a central argument of this article: agencies' advertising practices and strategic practices all help maintain, nourish and reproduce this creativity, which becomes the agency's very reason for being. Put in CCO terms, these practices recursively stage what matters to the actors and that to which they are attached (Cooren, 2013; Vásquez, et al., 2017), namely creativity.

## REGIONALITY AND THE ORGANIZING OF CREATIVITY

It is also important to look at how a region influences strategic practices of (advertising) creativity. A number of authors have examined this relationship, often in socio-economic and socio-political terms, whether regarding the presence of a creative class (Florida, 2003), creative clusters (Delgado, et al., 2010; Porter, 2007), or cities with creative potential, real or imagined (Collis, et al., 2010; Keil & Boudreau, 2010). Much research in the field of management has investigated companies' strategies for relocating to and becoming established in new regions (Hofstede, 1983, 2003; Rinne, et al., 2013; Van Maanen, 1992). However, their gaze is fundamentally deterministic in that it perceives the region as a pool of resources which may or may not enable creativity to flourish or to yield positive externalities (Le Corf, 2012). However, as Cooren (2013. My translation) notes:

> … addressing these figures or issues [of nationality, ethnicity, place of residence, or social hierarchy] *exclusively* in terms of resources would be a mistake, insofar as the fact that they are invoked 'in all interactions' (Sanders & Fitch, 2001 : 265) proves that they also considerably define how these people perceive themselves and others. (Cooren 2013: 165)

With respect to advertising agencies, a few authors have examined the matter of an agency's host region, often in comparative studies (Taylor, et al., 1996; Tungate, 2007; West, 1993). For instance, Moeran (2009) examines Japanese agencies, with a focus on power relations between agency practitioners and external firms, but without making reference to the Japanese context. Hill and Rahim (1997) show the congruency of creativity-related beliefs among executives in Australia and in Malaysia. Taylor, et al. (1996) for their part shed light on how French advertising uses different symbols from American advertising, but they examine the issue from a semiotic perspective. Yet none of these territorial approaches to agency creativity investigates how a region forges strategic practices of creativity.

Although many studies in the "traditional" management literature (See Hofstede, 1983, 1984, 2003) have dealt with companies' relocation and establishment in new regions, SAP research does not appear to have imported ways of taking into account the constraining and enabling "effects" of the region on strategic practices. Hence, little research has explored this region / strategic practice relationship. Pälli, et al. (2009), like Kornberger and Clegg (2011), have considered cities as an organizational context, but without bringing attention to how they might constrain or enable certain practices. Lounsbury (2007) has addressed the diffusion of certain contradictory strategic logics in the management of mutual funds by Boston and New York firms, demonstrating how the dissemination of new institutionalized practices may be shaped by many forms or modes of organizational rationality.

TYING TOGETHER STRATEGIC PRACTICES, REGION, AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION: A VENTRILOQUIAL PERSPECTIVE

Nevertheless, a region does show through in everyday actions, especially in texts and in discourses. Soja (1996) and others (Olwig, 2002; Waitt, 2006; Waitt, Hewitt & Kraly, 2006) view the region as composed of three interdependent aspects: an objective physical space with its buildings, downtowns and industrial parks; the way this space is imagined and represented; and the space as it is experienced and co-constructed by people. According to Philipsen (1992), this discursive and co-constructed region authorizes certain discourses and actions within specific physical locations, but also constrains actors in other circumstances. I contend that a region may be analyzed in terms of how it appears in organizational texts and discourse and "makes a difference" in organizing and strategizing. To conduct such an analysis, the present article draws on a branch of CCO, ventriloquism, to better conceptualize this relationship between action, text and discourse surrounding strategic practices (micro), on one hand, and region/institution (macro), on the other.

In his premise on ventriloquism, Cooren (2010a; 2010b; 2013) suggests that human beings are constantly animating figures—ideas, principles, values, ideologies and facts—in their conversations, insofar as they act or speak through these figures. In this sense, all communication can be likened to an act of ventriloquism: individuals ventriloquize figures to which they give voice or the ability to act. For example, when a manager is pleased that "economic conditions are allowing us to open up a position," he is animating the figure of "economic conditions" in order to prompt the person with whom he is speaking to share in his joy; this figure likewise animates (pleases) the manager so as to motivate him to open a position. Cooren (2010b) notes how these figures in turn animate individuals insofar as they appear to cause them to say or do things. Therefore, when we give voice to a fact or a principle, it is also because this fact or principle is animating us.

> This is an absolutely crucial point; the world acts upon us at least as much as we act upon it, a principle of symmetry that invites us to completely rethink how we study the world around us. … Admitting that action and agency are not the exclusive province of humans allows us to de-center our analysis and show how people are acted upon as much as they act. … integrating non-human or material agency simply comes down to admitting that we share our actions and/or activities with others. (Cooren, 2013: 40-41. My translation)

This delegation of agency enables Cooren, in line with constitutive approaches such as those of SAP (Arnaud, Mills, Legrand & Maton, 2016; Dameron, Lê & LeBaron, 2015; Jarzabkowski, et al., 2015), to lend autonomy to "texts":[2] by leaving behind their human author to be submitted to the interpretation of another interactant, texts have us say or do things just as much as we have them say or do things. Texts' agency is made possible by the fact that they make many figures "present," e.g. emotions, effects, passions but also facts, principles, ideas and so forth. It is thus possible, by observing these "haunting voices" in the text, to go back *upstream*[3] to what animates them.

2. For the proponents of the Montreal School CCO approach, texts are not strictly written documents but include all communications in their material and stable aspect(Arnaud, 2010; Cooren, 2010a).

3. Cooren distinguishes between the effects of upstream ventriloquism—"the person or thing in whose name a given interlocutor acts" (2013:189) and downstream ventriloquism—"what is said, written or more generally expressed (especially through intonation, gestures or body language) by an interlocutor" (2013:188).

> We can just as well examine what happens *upstream,* i.e. not only what seems to emerge from the actions and behaviours of interlocutors, from what *animates* them, but also what these interlocutors make present, in other words, what women and men represent in their interactions. (Cooren, 2013 : 88. My translation; original italics)

Moreover, individuals act *in the name of* these figures because they are attached to them. This attachment can enable or constrain us to act a certain way (Cooren, 2013, 2017). Hence, *in the name of* these conditions of practice, certain texts and discourse come to animate the organization and actively partake in its organizing (Cooren, Taylor & Van Every, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfels, 2005).

> … a constitutive approach recognizes the effects by which people in interaction manage to act and speak *for* or *in the name* of specific beings to which they feel (consciously or unconsciously) attached, whether these beings be principles, values, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, ideologies, interests, organizations, etc. (Cooren, et al., 2011; Taylor & Cooren, 1997). (Cooren, 2012 : 5)

When the actions of such a figure are powerful, regular and recurrent within an organization, the figure can attain the level of *cultural figure*. Identifying and analyzing these cultural figures helps unveil what is being re-presented and is acting "… not only in conversations, but more broadly in all practices and activities" (Cooren, 2013 : 94. My translation).

> The key idea here is the notion of 'cultivating,' i.e. some figures seem to be maintained, nourished or cultivated by what sociolinguistics and ethnographers of communication call 'speech communities.' ... Hence, if we observe that they are being staged here and there (implicitly and explicitly) through various interactions that we witness, these figures have a good likelihood of [achieving] what might be called 'cultural figure' status, in other words, figures that matter or are of import to a certain speech community. (Cooren, 2013 : 185. My translation)

## METHODOLOGY

As Arnaud (2010) points out, studying organizations while giving primacy to communication as being constitutive of organizations unquestionably implies a consideration of conversations—more fleeting in nature—but also of organizations at large as they appear in their stable material dimension. Arnaud (2010) furthermore notes that the different materials which constitute an organization call for different methods of data collection. The present research revolves around a case study (Gagnon, 2011) of two agencies, Agency L and Agency K. The methodological design is based on an integrated multiple-case study (Yin, 2011) in which each unit of analysis—the agency—is approached using the same protocol taking into account all possible levels—individual, intermediary (staff) and organization—and then observed in relation to its context as a "small advertising agency in an outlying region" (Figure 1). "This approach provides access to actors' lived experience in a 'situation,' thus reintroducing stories and making the actors' conversations intelligible" (Arnaud, 2010: 174. My translation).

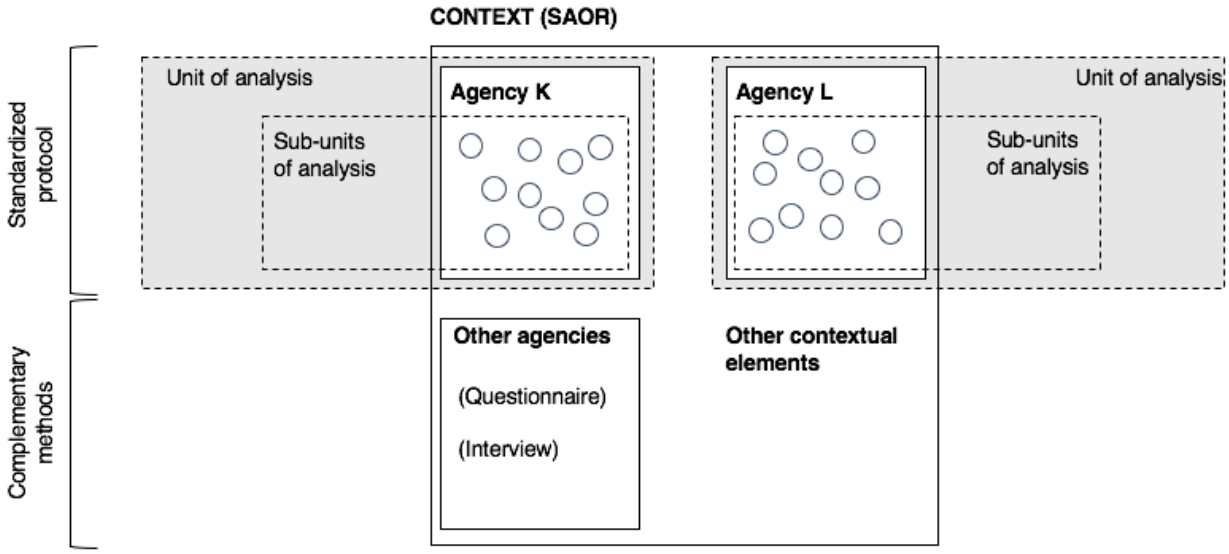



Figure 1 - Case study using an "integrated multiple strategy"

Practically speaking, during two three-week blocks, I observed the everyday activities of Agency K and Agency L, two SAORs in Villégion, a small outlying city with a population of 150,000 located in Quebec, Canada. The region was narrowed down to Villégion[2] primarily for reasons of accessibility, but also because I had worked there as a copywriter for nearly 10 years, which cut down on the time required to grasp the agencies' business context (Jaccoud & Mayer, 1997). To avoid any biases arising from this familiarity with the context, a professional distance was kept from the individuals involved, so as to maintain "disengaged relationships with the informants" (Gagnon, 2011 : 399. My translation). In this regard, Alvesson (2003 : 14) suggests the use of pragmatic reflexivity which "balanc[es] endless reflexivity and radical skepticism with a sense of direction and accomplishment".

| | Founding date | Size | Clients |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Agency K** | 2009 | 12 employees | Mainly local (54%), with 75% having their main address in Villégion. |
| **Agency L** | 2008 | 18 employees | 72% of clients since the agency's inception have been located in the region of Villégion. |

Table 1 – Overview of the two agencies under study

The agencies were chosen based primarily on meeting the criteria for a small and medium-sized enterprise (5 to 19 employees) and offering marketing communications services as defined by the criteria of the Quebec Culture and Communications Activity Classification System (QCCACS). After a review of the agencies that met these criteria, a first agency was chosen based on its relevance to the research (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Jaccoud & Mayer, 1997). Agency K was especially active

4. The names of the locations, agencies and participants involved have all been changed.

on social networks, with several posts emphasizing the agency's creativity. It was thus selected as a starting point. For the second site of study, enquiries were made, over the course of interviews with Agency K, about other agencies that would be worth meeting, in order to put together a "targeted sample, i.e. one reflecting informed choices about the next participants to recruit" (Larivière & Corbière, 2014 : 2230. My translation). Agency L was mentioned several times as being representative of the "new creativity" in Villégion.

The study thus used a mixed methodology involving 51 semi-structured interviews with 30 individuals (all employees of the two agencies in question); 45 hours of non-participant observation during meetings, ad hoc encounters and work meetings; and the collection of 90 organizational artifacts. This approach helped identify the appearances of figures who make a difference, whether in the course of interactions (non-participant observations of meetings and ad hoc encounters) or in texts (organizational artifacts). The interviews enabled the researcher to confirm his understanding of certain situations and to observe how various figures were animated.

To ensure data reliability and validity, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and researcher interpretations were submitted during a discussion group in each agency. In addition, the final results were validated via interviews with three employees (two directors and one artistic director) from two other SAORs in the same region, Outside Agency 1 and Outside Agency 2. The validity and reliability of the case study were therefore ensured by a triangulation of data, points of view and methods (Gagnon, 2011; Yin, 2008, 2011). All data was compiled in the qualitative data mining program *TAMS Analyzer* to be able to sift through each interview portion, conversation, organizational artifact and document to identify instances of the cultural figures' embodiment and animation in each of the two agencies.

## ANALYTICAL PROTOCOL

To illustrate this method, let us examine a passage in which Christophe, an artistic director at Agency L, presents a website mock-up to a client—a common practice to help explain the reflection process behind a creative proposal.

> So I'm going to start with the homepage, which for us is where we wanted to have the most "oomph" (bringing his hands in toward his body as if they were full). Business directories are boring, let's face it. Often when you land on a homepage it's drab, there's nothing there. We wanted to take things in a different direction and have something welcoming, something refreshing, and take advantage of that tangent to set you apart from other business directories, and I think with the brand we created, it was easy to do it and we're very happy with the result (brings up the homepage on screen).

My task thus consisted in "listing all the agents that are portrayed as leading these individuals to say what they say, whether upstream (via principles, emotions and values) or downstream (via words, facial expressions, body language, etc.)" (Cooren, 2013 : 19. My translation), in order to identify the recurrent (constantly appearing) figures. To make this "plenum of agencies" (Cooren, 2006) as meaningful as possible, the material was approached inductively before stepping up in abstractness (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). In the first level of analysis, the agents whose agency makes a difference in the organization

were identified (Gioia, et al., 2013). To take up the above example, the mock-up makes a difference in terms of what will be accepted as a relevant website for the client. In all, this yielded 247 agents.

Of these 247 agents, in the second level of analysis, a list was made of the figures who were animated therein. During the same round of analysis, I counted the frequently repeated and represented figures which consequently attained "cultural figure" status. In the above example, Christophe animates the figure of thought-out and distinctive creativity as having shaped the mock-up design process; a figure he mobilizes to remind the client of the importance of standing out from the competition. In total, the study identified 19 cultural figures animated in discourse or embodied in organizational literature.

To optimize analysis of the relationships between these figures, they were classified according to repeated situations, responses to certain circumstances, and behaviors during a given situation, with a view to "situating the process along a continuum" (Luckerhoff & Guillemette, 2012 : 598-599. My translation). This yielded five categories of iconic figures—seclusion, defense, distinctiveness, maturity, and expansiveness—that participate in organizing the creativity of SAORs. They will be detailed and analyzed in the next section. This method ultimately provides a perceptual map indicating the concentric relationship between the agents explicitly mentioned in empirical materials, the cultural figures animated in these agents, and the iconic figures that tie together all the materials and offer up a conceptual interpretation of the situation (Figure 2).

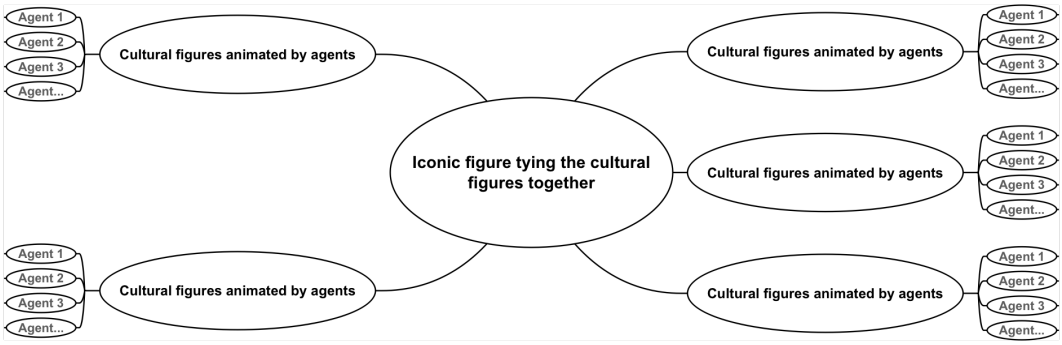



Figure 2 - Relationship between agents, cultural figures, and iconic figures

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The five iconic figures are presented along a continuum marked by their relationship to the "weight" of regionality. The first category of cultural figures is characterized by a region that undermines creativity, here named *figures of seclusion.* The second involves a situation where an attempt is made to free the organization from this weight, referred to as *figures of defense*. The third category, *figures of distinctiveness*, embodies the perception of an organization that distinguishes itself (or sets itself apart) from other organizations in the same region. In the fourth category, *figures of maturity*, the agency strives to give itself a mature status. Finally, the last category along the continuum embodies the idea that the agency, although located in an outlying region, has little to do with this region, i.e. *figures of expansiveness*. The following table sums up the five categories and their component cultural figures.

| Iconic figure | Description | Embodied in the cultural figures of... |
|---|---|---|
| **Seclusion** | The region undermines the agency's creativity by secluding it and hampering its access to the institutionalized creative ethos. | lack of resources, extinguished creativity, low standards, exclusion and isolation. |
| **Defense** | Employees defend ideologies of creativity, which they are not always able to access, by cultivating ideal types of this creativity amongst themselves. This defense translates into activities focused on client education and persuasion. | idealized creativity (i.e., bold, solution-focused, resourceful, aesthetic, integrated and visionary); the educating agency. |
| **Distinctiveness** | Employees cultivate a certain number of figures that make out their agency as having unique status and being a reference within the regional competitive ecosystem. | competitiveness, reference, attractive hub, unique signature. |
| **Maturity** | The agency's practices strive to come closer to the idealized ethos of the integrated agency. | profitability, balance, rigour. |
| **Expansiveness** | Employees cultivate and animate figures reflecting that even if they are in an outlying region, they are not a regional agency: they are elsewhere. | Emulation, virtuality, conquest. |

Table 2 - Iconic figures that are constitutive of SAORs

These five categories of figures represent the paradigmatic relationship between the cultural figures according to their degree of "distance" from their region. In other words, these figures show how the SAORs embody and powerfully animate this regionality, as much as this regionality powerfully acts on the SAORs in return.

In the next section, the five categories of iconic figures and their component cultural figures are presented and illustrated with examples to shed light on the connection between strategic practice of creativity, regionality and institution.

## FIGURES OF SECLUSION

The category of figures of seclusion contains cultural figures that embody or animate the weight of regionality, namely lack of (human and financial) resources, ambient low standards, exclusion from the major networks, and difficulty accessing prestigious clients. These figures of seclusion most powerfully embody the undermining effect of the region.

| Cultural figure | Embodied in… |
|---|---|
| **Lack of resources** | the figurative region as lacking the resources (budgets, talents and clients) necessary for "high-level" creation. |
| **Extinguished creativity** | the figurative region as lacking inspiring assignments or bold clients. |
| **Low standards** | the figurative region as being characterized by "regional style," a "grammar" of creativity used by advertisers or amateur creatives. |
| **Exclusion** | the figurative region as being discredited by clients located in neighbouring cities. |
| **Isolation** | the figurative region as not fostering professional sociability or the sharing of expertise. |

Table 3 - Cultural figures of seclusion and their embodiments

To illustrate this relationship between regionality, strategic practice and institutionalization, let us take the example of the figure of "low standards." The creativity of agencies in outlying regions is undermined by clients who, because they fail to understand the importance of original, compelling or bold marketing communications, would content themselves with basic advertising (e.g., texts with a single font hierarchy) in which they directly market themselves. Katherine, a graphic designer, and Marie-Chantal, a copywriter and account manager, aptly described what they referred to as "regional style":

> Katherine: [Regional style] is the basic level of a narcissistic boss who says, 'Well, I'm a plumber, so I'll just have a picture of myself in my plumber's attire saying that I'm a plumber."
>
> Marie-Chantal: Well in a few words I could sum it up as, it often has no thought behind it, so it looks like a pizza.

In this excerpt, Katherine and Marie-Chantal animate the regional style in order to depict certain clients from an unflattering point of view (amateurish, narcissistic, and lacking any knowledge of graphic design principles). In turn, this regional style animates these employees as counterexamples of what competent designers are supposed to do.

This regional style is animated in an assignment given to Agency K by a medical specialist in a private clinic who had ordered a billboard. At first, the client seemed inclined to embrace a humour-focused campaign. This avenue was reiterated in the course of various practices aiming to establish the client's assignment (order-taking, briefing to creatives, and meeting to discuss the creative direction). After a follow-up appointment with the client, this bold approach was dropped in favor of something "more direct":

> Client: You know I was mulling things over yesterday and… Well you know, I imagine we can't put everything we want to say up on the billboard.
>
> Marie-Chantal: As little as possible, or else you… You lose your…
>
> Client: Ok. I thought of a little something, maybe… like… 'Have you thought to have your children's feet checked?' or something like that, really simple…

(Marie-Chantal taking notes)

Client: Maybe a child running, with a smile on his face…

In this excerpt, Marie-Chantal attempts to block this interference from the client, whose proposal of "putting everything" up on a billboard would result in a "pizza" in the regional style. However, she notes down the client's ideas and the wish to have "something simple." After this meeting, Marie-Chantal got back to her graphic designers and simplified the concept to three frames with obvious lines of text for "short-term results" (my emphasis):

> Marie-Chantal: Right. Here (pointing at her notebook) we would just write "plantar orthotics," with the logo and phone number, then there will be another one that's (looking through her notes) "Nail laser," "Healthy feet," logo, phone number; then (again referring to her notes) "Start off on the right foot," (continues writing), "Con-sult a po-di-a-trist," logo, phone number. Then (still looking at her notes) "Foot pain, consult"—oh, what do you know, the logo again. Because he wants short-term results. He wants phone calls. And people have been calling him for services he hadn't expected. *Maybe at some point we'll have an opportunity to do something more…*
>
> Véronique: Different.
>
> Marie-Chantal: Different, but right now, he isn't yet well known. What he wants is clients, to make a living. So you know, you know— It's not— We can come up with something nice, something interesting. *It won't be the advertising concept of the century, but it will be what it will be.*

The above excerpt shows that in this conversation between Marie-Chantal and Véronique, the client is made present—Marie-Chantal even points to the spot in her notebook where she wrote down "keep everything simple"—and acts upon the discussion. Marie-Chantal appears to be animated by the desire for simplicity, to the detriment of boldness or "doing something different." The final result did indeed display the client with the title "Consult a doctor in [specialty] medicine." In other words, a plumber, in plumber's attire, saying "consult a plumber"…

We can thus see how this regional style, which circulates as a kind of uncreative "grammar" (Veron, 1991), animates the client's decision while confronting the employees with a certain experience of the region that seems to act upon their discourse. The discourse is shaped by a set of expectations of what would constitute a "regional advertisement"—expectations for which the client acts as spokesperson and to which the designers are supposed to respond favorably. This regional spirit thus makes a difference in terms of the ideas that are selected, which are far from "the advertising concept of the century." The figures of seclusion weigh heavily on the creative ethos of Agency L and Agency K. Freeing oneself from this regionality of creation would require the elimination of significant socio-economic constraints, which can be said to "haunt" (Cooren, 2013) discourse in the form of figures of seclusion.

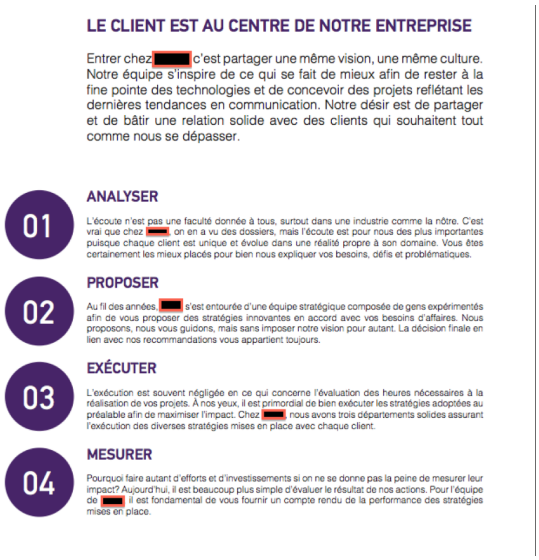
FIGURES OF DEFENSE

To counter these undermining effects of regionality, both SAORs cultivate figures that act to avoid creativity from being torpedoed by seclusion. This is achieved by summoning the figures of an idealized creativity, and by animating client education practices in order to bring these clients to become attached to this ideal creativity.

| Cultural figure | Embodied in… |
|---|---|
| ideal creativity | ideologies, theories and definitions of a bold, solution-focused, aesthetic, integrated, visionary and resourceful creativity. |
| the educating agency | client education activities regarding the agency's added value, the fundamentals of communication, the importance of creativity, and the complexity of the creative process. |

Table 4 - Cultural figures of defense and their embodiments

To illustrate the connection between strategic practice of creativity, regionality and institution, let us examine the figure of the educating agency. This figure is cultivated through strategic practices that animate and are animated by the figure of ideal creativity. For example, at the time of my visit, both agencies had started producing mechanisms and documents to educate their clients about the process and about "good creativity": sales documents (Figure 3) or wall posters (Figure 4) were used to show clients the complexity of creative production and to make them aware that, at each step of their project, they may (must) expect reflection, which they might have difficulty appreciating. These processes help clients buy into the process so that they will share "one same vision and culture" (Figure 3). These shared elements are supposed to allow the creative process to follow its course unimpeded.



LE CLIENT EST AU CENTRE DE NOTRE ENTREPRISE

Entrer chez [redacted] c'est partager une même vision, une même culture. Notre équipe s'inspire de ce qui se fait de mieux afin de rester à la fine pointe des technologies et de concevoir des projets reflétant les dernières tendances en communication. Notre désir est de partager et de bâtir une relation solide avec des clients qui souhaitent tout comme nous se dépasser.

01 ANALYSER

L'écoute n'est pas une faculté donnée à tous, surtout dans une industrie comme la nôtre. C'est vrai que chez [redacted], on en a vu des dossiers, mais l'écoute est pour nous des plus importantes puisque chaque client est unique et évolue dans une réalité propre à son domaine. Vous êtes certainement les mieux placés pour bien nous expliquer vos besoins, défis et problématiques.

02 PROPOSER

Au fil des années, [redacted] s'est entourée d'une équipe stratégique composée de gens expérimentés afin de vous proposer des stratégies innovantes en accord avec vos besoins d'affaires. Nous proposons, nous vous guidons, mais sans imposer notre vision pour autant. La décision finale en lien avec nos recommandations vous appartient toujours.

03 EXÉCUTER

L'exécution est souvent négligée en ce qui concerne l'évaluation des heures nécessaires à la réalisation de vos projets. À nos yeux, il est primordial de bien exécuter les stratégies adoptées au préalable afin de maximiser l'impact. Chez [redacted], nous avons trois départements solides assurant l'exécution des diverses stratégies mises en place avec chaque client.

04 MESURER

Pourquoi faire autant d'efforts et d'investissements si on ne se donne pas la peine de mesurer leur impact? Aujourd'hui, il est beaucoup plus simple d'évaluer le résultat de nos actions. Pour l'équipe de [redacted], il est fondamental de vous fournir un compte rendu de la performance des stratégies mises en place.

Figure 3 - Creation process as outlined in a sales quote by Agency L


Figure 4 - Creation process posted on a wall at Outside Agency 1

Speaking about an assignment that was particularly tedious to manage owing to a lack of mutual understanding between Agency L and a client, Maxime, the agency's CEO, relates an ad hoc conversation with a few members of the team:

> I really had to explain to him: "When someone comes to you with their table napkin…" (imitating client) "Félix told me this is what everyone did, send the agency a sketch," I said there are two ways to evaluate a project: either you come to us with a concept, and we define, price and execute the project. Or, you come to us with tight specifications. And this (waving a piece of scrap paper) doesn't count as specifications.

In this instance, Maxime must break the client's attachment to misconceptions and educate him about actual practices in the creative process. Whereas the client considers that setting a project in motion merely requires an idea or sketch, Maxime stages himself to educate the client about good practices. To permit himself to act in this capacity, he ventriloquizes the two basic (institutionalized) principles of the advertising creativity process: having a clear concept and setting a price in a rigorous manner. By being animated by principles of efficient practice, Maxime reminds the client that he has the authority to determine the agency-client relationship, or even to reprimand the client.

Summoning the figure of ideal creativity—to the point of displaying it on a wall where clients are greeted (Figure 5)—reminds clients that they are entering an agency that *defends* a complex process, creative solutions and beautiful work, but also that these elements will require reflection.


Figure 5 - Wall behind the receptionist at Outside Agency 2

Importantly, many definitions of creativity are embodied in the ideas of "going further," "moving forward," "bringing the client somewhere," or "outside," as if there were a *place* of introjected convention from which one must be extricated. *Bringing the client somewhere else* entails breaking the client's attachment to the region—to the regional style and the desire to stage oneself with a view to garnering recognition in the community—which requires forcefully summoning figures in order to permit oneself to act in this guide-like capacity. The discourse and constitutive texts of both SAORs serve to demonstrate that clients could not *get there* on their own.

By embodying these figures of creativity in organizational literature, the employees hope to unshackle both themselves and their clients from the figures of seclusion. As Cooren recalls (2010a), "by definition, following an instruction manual implies that it will bring you somewhere" (Cooren, 2010a : 5. My translation). This instruction manual that the clients are invited to follow is intended to bring them to put more emphasis on creativity—thus conveying the agency's strategic aim to explicitly include creativity in its relationship with the client (Arnaud, et al., 2016)—and thereby to free the agency from its own regionality. Client education is more than a rhetorical tactic or merely taking an interest in the client: it is voiced in conversations with the client (e.g., reminding him of what makes good advertising), set forth in documents and guides, and re-invoked in these texts in order to be made authoritative. Client education consequently stages actors such as account managers, graphic designers, and agency executives who ventriloquize the figures of creativity in their discourse, call upon various texts to support this strategy, and ventriloquize these texts to make a difference with respect to the client. This clearly involves strategic recursiveness (Lundgren & Blom, 2015) to support what matters to the agency, i.e. creativity.

FIGURES OF DISTINCTIVENESS

For a knowledge-based enterprise such as an SAOR, developing a sense of uniqueness is key to survival (Alvesson, 1994, 2004; Nixon, 2003). By cultivating the figures of creativity, which are mobilized in client education discourse, the employees of both SAORs are able to maintain their image as a distinctive agency in the ecosystem of regional competition, that is, the landscape of competing agencies, of course, but also other intermediaries such as the promotional departments of local media, printers, and freelancers. This figurative competition enables the agency to distance itself from the competitive ecosystem: "… we sort of have blinders on, you know, I—we try to look at what others are doing [in the area] but we don't find it very inspiring." (Daniel, account planning director and shareholder, Agency L). This distinctiveness is embodied in the figures of competition, the reference (benchmark) agency, the attractive agency, the signature agency, and the dominant agency.

| Cultural figure | Embodied in… |
|---|---|
| **The reference agency** | the figurative agency as leading the creative pack, inspiring the region's other SAORs. |
| **The attractive agency** | the interior design, furniture and recruitment discourse all stage the ideal expected of the creative agency: a cool, fun, friendly, forward-thinking atmosphere. |
| **The signature agency** | a signature or style that other SAORs or even clients recognize in the agency's productions. |
| **The dominant agency** | agency dominating the regional creative landscape, without any real competition. |

Table 5 - Cultural figures of distinctiveness and their embodiments

An example of a strategic decision supporting this dynamic of distinctiveness would be when graphic designers decided to set up a screen-printing workshop, which they named La Bastille—an important creative artifact, according to Daniel, account planning manager and principal shareholder. When "selling" the project to shareholders at the agency's yearly board meeting, Daniel and Christophe maintained that, over and beyond the project's profitability, the Bastille would be an important flagship of the agency's creativity.

> Daniel: The first thing I think Agency L will get out of it is permanent infrastructure: A photo workshop, a screen-printing workshop where we'll be able to create full-time using this kind of structure. So, it can help showcase Agency L. It's a significant project that could earn us a Boomerang or Graphika award, all the freaking awards, and create material. It's a significant project for the community. Everyone we talk to about it is impressed. It can also grab the attention of our peers in Montreal.

> Christophe: And attract a quality workforce
>
> Daniel: Attract a workforce. And in terms of attention, you know, the creatives in Montreal could be like,"Oh that's freaking hot, there's something going on there."So really it would showcase Agency L because Agency L would–"Powered by Agence L". It would be an Agency L initiative. I think we'd be able to grow our revenues when it gains recognition and notoriety.

In this conversation, we can see that Daniel animates and reinforces several institutionalized figures that matter to the agency: the recognition of peers, Montreal as a standard of creativity, creativity awards, and the ideal of the attractive agency.

It is worth pointing out that many of the cultural figures that embody this distinctiveness stem from perceptions by the agency's members. This could be argued to be a case of begging the question or identity self-promotion (Alvesson, 2003). However, the figures of distinctiveness are mobilized in such a way as to animate a complex system of representations that are part and parcel of SAORs' creative ethos. Cultivating uniqueness offers a way to legitimize and make tolerable positions that seem contradictory: indeed, how is it possible to escape the status of a regional agency when that is precisely what one is? SAOR employees animate figures in order to distinguish themselves and, again, to be something other than a regional agency. Thanks to this distinctiveness, the participants nurture the sense of a *place within a place* (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2015): a place would exist a place where the agency or the region has no bearing, and where discourse would delimit the "sense of place" mentioned by Philipsen (1992).

## FIGURES OF MATURITY

We have seen how SAORs mobilize a number of figures of creativity that are needed to mark a distinction between genuine agencies and other intermediaries, and that the ultimate state of grace for an agency is to be an integrated multiservice agency (Davis, 2013; McFall, 2004; Nixon, 2003). Embodying these figures requires an agency to be structured to offer integrated services, but above all, demonstrates the maturity that comes with multiservice status. More concretely, offering integrated services means integrating these services in-house, which means structuring the workflow so that each individual in the creative chain can intervene at the right time. This maturity is embodied in the figures of profitability, balance, rigor, confidence and independence.

| Cultural figure | Embodied in… |
|---|---|
| **Profitability** | a flow of stable regular clients with a minimum budget. |
| **Balance** | a balanced team, with the necessary talents possessing the right personality and skills. |
| **Rigour** | mechanisms that ensure better process management and production quality. |
| **Confidence** | a well-stocked portfolio of prestigious or complex clients. |
| **Independence** | inbound clients who come to the agency unsolicited, on the strength of the agency's talent. |

Table 6 - Cultural figures of maturity and their embodiments

To illustrate this dynamic of maturity, let us take the cultural figure of rigour. During a shareholders' meeting, Daniel, account planning manager and shareholder at Agency L, presented the actions to take to be able to structure the sales workflow.

> The final point concerning sales is how to structure them. Structuring sales is super important. We've already started, you can see the timetable, the idea is to implement a CRM [Customer Relationship Management system], a follow-up methodology, to set up a client qualification system, to put in place a more fixed needs-assessment method for evaluation, to set sales targets for each seller, to harmonize sales arguments, to establish the company's vision, its mission and statement.

It is clear in this excerpt that Daniel is attached to this rigour, which he delegates in organizational texts. Indeed, he acts as a ventriloquist for this rigor, which he disseminates through various tools. In turn, these texts make a difference during project follow-up, client selection, client needs assessments, etc.

In both agencies, practices have begun to be adopted to standardize work processes.These standardized processes have been put in writing so that all employees can become familiar with the chain, the individuals, and the aspects involved (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

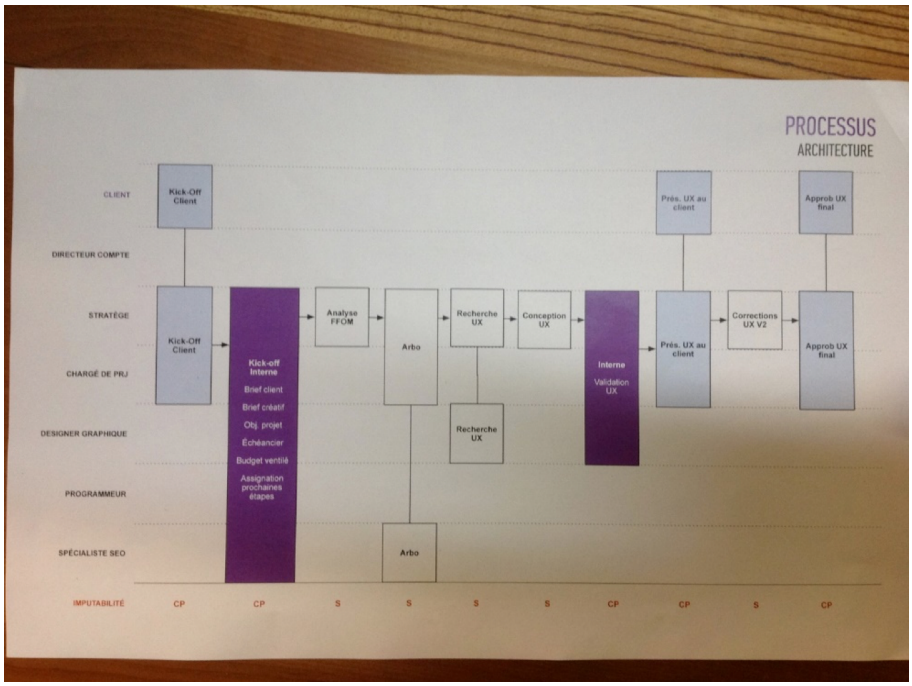



Figure 6 - Work process (Agency L)


TABLE DES MATIÈRES

NOM DE LA CATÉGORIE DE PROJETS



Figure 7 - Table of contents for the agency's internal process (Agency K)

As Cooren (2013) notes, these procedures "can be ignored, altered or destroyed, but as long as they are still intact and referred to, [they] will continue to repeat exactly the same thing, to the letter, for the next time around, and in doing so generate certain *organizing* or *structuring effects*" (Cooren, 2013 : 224. Our translation; original emphasis). In the cases at hand, protocols, standards, regulations and other procedures, as "regulating agents" (Cooren, 2013 : 224)—in conjunction with strategic decisions—display the agency's cohesion, integration and creative processes. When implemented strategically, i.e. when they have been discussed and deliberated, then set forth in organizational texts before being called upon to support what matters to the agency, these regulating agents produce knowledge for the agency (Grosjean, 2011, 2013; Vásquez, *et al.*, 2017) while also controlling/defining/delimiting what constitutes the agency (Cooren, 2013).

## FIGURES OF EXPANSIVENESS

The "elsewhere" that is constantly invoked in the figures of creativity, discussed earlier, plays an especially active role at the other end of the continuum of iconic figures, with the figures of expansiveness. Expansiveness is the result of successful or unsuccessful attempts to extricate the agency from regional seclusion. In these figures of expansiveness, we find actions which, without being explicitly strategic—indeed, they may be altogether unintentional or immanent (Chia & Holt, 2006)—nevertheless cause the agency to tend toward an "elsewhere" that is free from the torments of regionality. This expansiveness is particularly prominent in the cultural figures of emulation, virtuality, and conquest.

| Cultural figure | Embodied in… |
|---|---|
| **the emulated agency** | texts and discourses seeking to present the agency as being similar to the major metropolitan agencies. |
| **the virtual agency** | a virtualization of geography thanks to digital tools that erase any traces of the region (no physical address, phone number with no area code, etc.). |
| **the conquest agency** | actions aimed at conquering the major metropolitan markets. |

Table 7 - Cultural figures of expansiveness and their embodiments

For example, one notable figure of expansiveness is the figure of conquest. To access this creative "elsewhere" to which the client and the agency must be "brought," the executives of both agencies consider that steps must be completed so the agency will be able to scale up to the big city, or at least will no longer be a regional agency.

First, the agency must prove that its structure is solid enough, as embodied by the team's composition and the agency's portfolio, like Sylvain, founder and principal shareholder, Agency K, told us:

> Y'know, over the coming year, I want us to take on the big leagues, to say 'so here are X number of clients we want, what do we do to go and get them?' And we take the time to prepare a pitch, we put together a presentation. Then we can create something or even arrive with a concept and say, 'look, here's what we would do.' Y'know, that's been what I've wanted to do since day one. It's been almost three years now, and I think now the team is solid, and our portfolio, too.

The second step is to have a "niche" that will serve as a business card to penetrate metropolitan territory. A third step required to conquer the Montreal market would be to prove that the agency is ready to work with the culture of client companies in Montreal, and *at the same time*, to make sure these companies view the agency as a sufficiently credible partner to meet their needs. Sylvain ably explains this twofold function of the Montreal clients in his agency's portfolio.

> We have a few clients like that. Y'know [names two pharmaceutical clients], it's a good example of—they have fantastic notoriety, they're everywhere in Quebec pharmacies. They have a spokesperson the likes of [known star], their product is relatively well known. Those clients, I think, will allow us to go get other major clients. (Sylvain, founder and principal shareholder, Agency K)

This rhetoric on the agency's relationship (Alvesson, 2004) with two metropolitan partners also plays out in an attachment to prestigious agencies that represent the ethos of the creative agency, as Christophe told us.

> Even us, when we're in Montreal at the Boomerangs and everything, I feel like it's flowing now, it's more fluid. We know a lot of people left and right in the agencies. The people at TP1—I know a lot of people with Sid Lee, Akufen. So it's like, it's already more fluid, these are our kind of people. Those people could come work at Agency L, they would fit right in. So maybe we're more sort of a Montreal agency really.

However, travelling to Montreal is not enough in itself to lay claim to being a Montreal agency, or even having minimal "right of passage" on the territory of metropolitan agencies. The participants maintained that having an office in Montreal is key to the agency's credibility and constitutes the ultimate step. Again, Christophe:

> I don't think you can settle for just being in Villégion and going out and getting clients in Montreal. At some point, clients, I think they want physical contact, they want to be able to come over to the agency. So I think eventually it will be unavoidable to position ourselves in Montreal, physically.

The forcefulness of this figure of *physical* conquest over Montreal is such that Agency L did indeed end up opening a satellite office a few months after I visited the agency. The figure was already present in the agency's triennial development plan and had been discussed during a previous shareholders' meeting.

Once more, these cultural figures of conquest are embodied in texts and discourse, namely a presentation and portfolio that displays the agency's solidity; a point on the agenda for shareholders, and an office in Montreal. Through multiple iterations of these cultural figures and the "recursive relationship of talk and text" (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011, p. 1217), these figures appear to project the agency in a strategic direction that extricates it from its regional status. Moreover, institutionalizing dynamics can be seen at work here, haunting the strategic practices of both SAORs. It is evident that the agencies' practices are also a result of dominant extra-organizational practices (Whittington, 2006) that guide the field of advertising creation at large, i.e. ways of doing things originating from popular and award-winning agencies, and clients considered to be representative of best marketing practices.

## DISCUSSION: THE DISLOCATIVE AND CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES OF SAORS

As we have seen, SAORs' organizing and their strategic practices of creativity are located at the crossroads of institutionalized constitutive practices—the cult of creativity that employees attempt to establish—and the effects of regionality. This regionality is animated by figures of seclusion that hamper access to this creative ethos, but that are fought off by the figures of defense and distinctiveness. The figures of maturity, for their part, animate the agency in a desire to achieve the status of a respectable agency, so that finally, thanks to the figures of expansiveness, the agency can unshackle itself from regionality.

This dynamic of unshackling is constitutive of organizing in SAORs. Thus, especially under the impetus of figures of expansiveness, the agency is animated by, and animates, a status that is no longer weighed down by regionality. In the elan leading to this expansiveness, different figures extricate the agency by shifting it toward an institutionalized

*elsewhere*. The figures of virtuality, for example, erase the very existence of regional smallness, whereas the figures of conquest push the agency in the direction of a potential elsewhere. The weight of regionality thus engenders dislocation practices (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) note that interactions (micro) always happen here and now, in contrast with structures (macro), which refer to something that appears to be both here and elsewhere, hence the neologism "dis-local":

> Instead, [interactions] are what we call, using a neologism, "dis-local," that is, their local achievement is always mobilizing a variety of entities—documents, rules, protocols, architectural elements, machines, technological devices—that dislocate, i.e. "put out of place" (Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary: 289) what initially appeared to be "in place," i.e. local. … We never leave the level of events and actions even as these events and actions become linked to one another through space and time. Paraphrasing Latour (1993) while giving it a Derridian flavor, one could say that the immanent (micro) is also always already transcendent (macro). (Cooren & Fairhust, 2009: 122-123)

This dislocation brings into play a number of figures that are exogenous to the agency—regional style, shy clients, uninspiring assignments, etc.—which constantly remind the agency of its regional status, as a form of upstream ventriloquism haunting the discourse of SAORs. Acting antonymically (literally "contrary to the name of"), the figures of expansiveness partly act no longer *in the name of*, but *against the name of* this region.

This antonymy is nevertheless not an intentionally oppositional act, but rather the result of a constant growing clash between the figures of seclusion, the figures of defence, and the projective figures of expansiveness—as a way, in everyday practice, to deal with colliding visions of the world and in particular the collision between regionality and the cult of creativity as it is institutionalized (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In other words, the desire for expansiveness is already present in the figures of creativity, haunting them: none of the participants wishes to do uninspiring assignments, i.e. subsistence jobs that require little reflection with "plumbers in plumbers' attire saying I'm a plumber" (see earlier example).

To address this seclusion, a myriad of strategic practices emerge. One of these is to defend the agency via education strategies mobilized through discourses and presentation texts for clients, guides, and contractual documents that animate the figures of idealized creativity. Another strategic practice is distinctiveness, or seeking to attract the top talents in a limited pool, and then to situate the agency within the figurative ecosystem of the competition. In the strategic practices animated by the figures of maturity, efforts are made to standardize work processes in order to successfully embrace the ethos of the integrated agency that is able to manage complex assignments; these efforts play an especially important role in the constitutive activity of the SAORs we have discussed.

These strategic practices that are "antinomic" to regionality therefore are neither strictly normative nor intentional, but rather reflect a form of organizational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). A good number of figures of expansiveness are projective in nature (Cooren, 2013: 224): finding inspiration elsewhere, emulating a Montreal culture or agency, and identifying with a creative doxa become as many "elsewheres" that can never be attained, even as they constitute possibilities that should

desirably be attained and that "guide choices between different potential courses of action, while being themselves shaped by how we use these possibilities" (Joas, 1999: 165. My translation). Hence, dislocation makes it possible to be somewhere while simultaneously being elsewhere. The impulse is ecstatic in nature: the cultural figures of expansiveness seem to push in the direction of the elsewhere as much as they import its features. Hence the figures' projective force. They play a powerful role when emphasizing relationships with reputed metropolitan agencies or clients; when they are embedded in an agency's development plans; and when they delegate employees to competitions so that they will be able to bring back new practices.

Figure 8 sums up my proposition. Although SAORs are marked by regionality—with all the weight of seclusion it entails—they tend toward this projected elsewhere animated by institutionalized figures. In doing so they are animated as much as they animate the figures acting *against the name of* this regionality. The recursive strategic practices (both immanent and deliberate) that iteratively animate this dislocation become constitutive of SAORs' organizing around creativity.

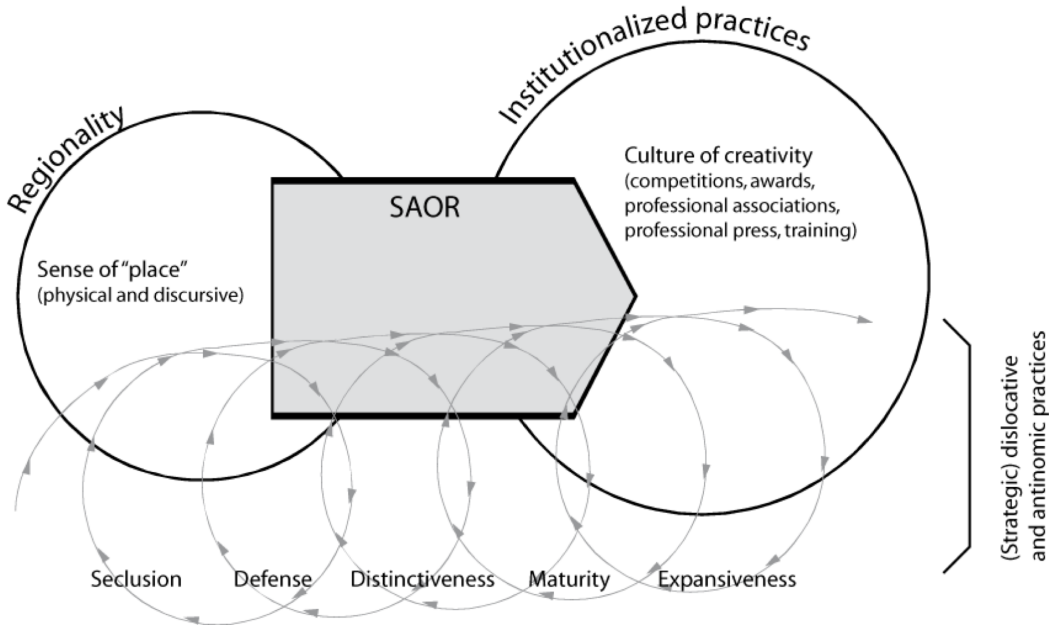



Figure 8 - Constitutive dynamics of SAORs

## CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This article has attempted to illustrate how a region can become an organizational actant, i.e. how it can act on the direction taken by an advertising agency in an outlying region by inviting or encouraging the agency's members to dislocate their constitutive practices in order to come closer to an institutionalized elsewhere. Based on the premise of ventriloquism (Cooren, 2013), I have attempted to show that cultural figures—in other words, what is intensively, recurrently and constantly cultivated—provide insight into what is animated in an agency's texts and organizational discourse as much as these figures animate the members of

the organization, thus shaping its constitution (Cooren, 2012, 2015; Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, McPhee, Seidl & Taylor, 2014). In this sense, the region—as something discursively co-constructed and that is always haunting the agency—allows a greater understanding of how some strategic practices to cultivate this creativity are carried out in the name of the region, but also against it, and thereby push the organization in a certain direction. Going a step further, it has been proposed that the region be taken into account not only in terms of strictly socio-economic aspects exogenous to creative organizing (Szostak & Dechamp, 2016), but also as an actor with clear and evident agency. Moreover, we have seen how institutions (and especially the marketing communications industry) promote practices that are reintegrated on the firm ground of interactions, but also how these practices embrace or are pitted against regional practices. A ventriloquial perspective brings attention to various institutionalized and regional embodiments, which are sometimes opposed and sometimes complementary, but in all cases make a difference in the organization.

In terms of management, a ventriloquial perspective on regionality entails a consideration not only of regional socio-economic conditions that would be conducive to innovation—a much-studied topic in the context of socio-economic approaches to creative industries (Florida, 2003; Le Corf, 2012; Nicolas, 2012; Pratt, 2008)—but also of what is done *in or against the name of the region*. Observing what must be pitted *against the name of* the region, or identifying the elsewheres that are consequently cultivated, makes it possible to determine the "effectiveness" of these conditions in the organization, but also what matters to it and what constantly haunts its interactions. Bringing these powerful and recursive cultural figures to light may also help give them greater authority (Vásquez, et al., 2017), for example if greater alignment is sought by educating a client about creativity as it is cultivated by employees; by creating a screen-printing workshop to lend greater authority to creative experimentation; or by devising procedures to identify qualifying clients in terms of their creative and financial potential. In this context, cultivating creativity does not refer to what one says about creativity, but rather what one does *in its name*. Put differently, the centrality of this creativity must be embodied in strategic actions, in texts and in discourses. Conversely, the present contribution sheds light on how an agency's degree of attachment to its region can seclude it or "pull it" toward regionally cultivated practices while keeping it distant from institutionally constituted practices, thus preventing the agency from going "elsewhere." The intent here is not to say that agencies in small cities should ignore their regional status, but rather that regional does not mean inferior. As we can clearly see with Agency L and its success in scaling up (Leibovitz, 2006) to a big city, the idea of urban smallness is more the result of a culture smallness than a matter of socio-demographic or socio-economic factors.

> 'smallness is in the urban habitus; it's about ways of acting, self-image, the sedimented structures of feeling, sense of place and aspiration. You are only as small as you think you are – or as other cities make you feel.' (Bell & Jayne, 2006: 4)

Defending oneself from a sense of smallness—with respect to often urban-centric institutionalized practices—first requires an acknowledgement that this smallness exists, if only because of a perception of "small as lacking" (Waitt, et al., 2006: 230), and then a detachment from this lack, hand-in-hand with an attachment to what matters. Indeed, consistent with the conceptualization detailed in this

article, one must go from seclusion to expansiveness, with the latter not necessarily being a strictly physical dislocation but, at the very least, being cultivated in practices.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

> Whether we call it 'institutionalization', 'legitimization', 'naturalization' or 'normalization', there is a great deal of work still to be done to explain how widely held assumptions about appropriate strategizing methods influence what is actually done in organizations, and how these activities, then, reproduce or at times transform prevailing understandings and practices. (Golsorkhi, et al., 2015, Kindle location: 1384-1386)

In response to Vaara and Whittington (2012), this article has shown that it is possible to bring together the micro and macro aspects of SAP by taking account of the practices that constitute a professional sector in order to be able to better understand them as they are reproduced in creative practices, especially in the dynamics of defense and maturity. These dynamics recursively maintain institutionalized practices, which are powerfully ventriloquized in the figures of expansiveness. Moreover, I have added a fourth dimension to the micro-meso-macro linkage traditionally applied to the actions of an organization and a disciplinary field (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007), i.e. a dimension that does not stem entirely from the field, the organization or the practices themselves, but that does nevertheless shape these practices: the region as discursively co-constructed. In demonstrating how certain regional practices are a result of both non-disciplinary social practices (e.g., being a businessman well known to the region) and disciplinary but regional practices (e.g., advertising in the regional style), this article has proposed that observing cultural figures adds a dimension that helps uncover what constrains or enables certain practices. Thus, in line with Seidl and Whittington (2014), rather than staying limited to a vertical micro-meso-macro ontology of SAP, I have expanded this scope by taking account of an agency's relationship to regional dimensions.

Finally, the proposed constitutive perspective on regionality sheds light on how a socio-economic perspective is not enough in itself to understand the role a region plays within an organization. By also considering the agency of the region, we can ultimately explain why, in spite of the socio-economic conditions required to promote creative development, some regions fail to act as catalysts for innovation, or this vibrancy fails to trickle down to the organization (Leibovitz, 2006). In doing so we uncouple regionality from a certain determinism, whether socio-economic (Florida, 2003; Pratt, 2008) or cultural (Hofstede, 1983, 2003), in order to shed greater light on the region's agency in strategic practices of creativity and their constitutive role for SAORs.

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