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On the Limits of Being 'Corporate': Internal Mobility, Parrhesia, and Ethical Disasters

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'These are complex questions, that one cannot answer with simple solutions', says Nicolas Silhol in a crowded Parisian *bistrot* — automatically winning the hearts of the authors of the present article. Back in September 2009, when the then-CEO of France Télécom Didier Lombard characterized the wave of suicides in his company as a 'fad',[1] Silhol went into an 'ethical shock'. He decided to write a movie, in

collaboration with Nicolas Fleureau, that 'asks the question of individual responsibility [and] the role of middle management'. Reading about workplace suffering and listening to academics on the matter — chiefly Christophe Dejours and Vincent de Gaulejac — they tried to understand how someone within the system could, at some point and at tremendous cost, end up standing against it. After many attempts at different angles and approaches, the character of Emilie Tesson-Hansen imposed herself as the central piece of this story. A story that is about 'responsibility, responsibility, responsibility', Nicolas says, still passionate and engaged years after putting the script together.

In 2017, after several years of writing and production, Nicolas Silhol finally directed *Corporate*. It tells the story of the aforementioned Emilie, a young and brilliant human resources manager — a 'rising star' and a 'killer' of the Esen group. Her main assignment is to get rid of some of the Esen's employees who are judged as being under-performing and/or too old. However, due to the company's status, she cannot just fire them, and thus needs to use all the tricks in the managerial book. One day, however, an employee is pushed too far, and commits suicide.

Following the dramatic event, an investigation is opened, and Emilie finds herself on the front lines. She has to face pressure not only from a thorough — and remarkably well written and acted — female labor inspector but also from her hierarchy, which threatens to turn against her. Emilie is determined to save herself, but how far will she remain 'corporate' — i.e., woman of the corporation?

This movie echoes numerous situations in corporations, but particularly the one of France Télécom whose trial ended on December 20, 2019. The Paris Criminal Court decided to follow the maximum recommendations. First, the former CEO Didier Lombard and Louis-Pierre Wenès, his number 2, alongside the head of HR Olivier Barberot, were all sentenced to a year in prison and 15,000€ in fines. Second, the France Télécom group was sentenced for institutional moral harassment, i.e.,

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[1.] *The Telegraph*, 6 mai 2019, France Télécom and former CEO stand trial for 'harassment' after 35 employees commit suicide.

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harassment resulting not from individual behavior but from a corporate strategy aimed at creating an 'anxiety-provoking climate'. This represents a legal revolution.[2]

The Court found that from 2007 to 2010, the France Télécom group pushed its employees to change positions, jobs, or, ideally, leave the company altogether. To facilitate this goal, they used despicable managerial methods to weaken employees and create a climate of stress and anxiety – just like Esen in the movie. The official aim was to secure the resignations of 22,000 civil servants and arrange the job mobility of 12,000 others – out of 120,000 employees. The middle management itself was similarly under institutionalized pressure from the company leadership and ordered to execute this brutal plan.

In the first section of the article, Anne Janand returns to the misuse of internal mobility, that is the purposeful shifting around of people's positions and jobs within the company. Initially presented as an incentive (in a changing world, employees must proactively manage their careers), it became an imperative in France Télécom in order to push out employees deemed underperforming or inadequate. From 2009, mobility, thus, revealed itself as a new imperative in the service of liquid societies: we must be constantly light and agile – in our work as well as in our personal lives. The section, thus, asks: How does this imperative of mobility constitute a new form of managerial domination? What kind of differentiation does it create

between employees? How do HR managers cope with the ethical dilemmas emerging from these new forms of management?

Lidwine Maizeray tackles related questions, with a focus on the path followed by Emilie in her quest for the truth. In this perspective, the movie describes the ethical dilemma of a manager faced with the question: How far should I be 'corporate' in my support of the company's strategy and managerial methods? In the case of Esen, 'being corporate' for an HR manager means not disturbing the silence with a voicing of concerns about the strategies and policies of the organization. However, being corporate becomes more difficult when the labor inspector lifts the veil of the truth. At this point, even if the revelation of such truths leads to harmful consequences, Emilie decides to own up to her responsibilities. This puts her in the position of being a Foucaldian parrhesiast, who stands by the truth despite any practical and moral considerations.

Yoann Bazin concludes these three sections with an essay about business ethics in liquid corporations. He argues that it is when organizational disasters occur and when the bureaucratic apparatus is in ruins – when nothing is 'under control' anymore – that ethics can appear. Paradoxically, the tragic suicide of her colleague, in relation to how her own actions contributed to this, is what triggers an ethical jolt in Emilie – leading her to question her past conduct and to work toward leaving up to her values in the future.

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[2] *Le Monde*, 21 décembre 2019, Procès France Télécom : un tournant dans le droit pénal du travail.

Internal Mobility as an Incentive to a New Form of Domination – The Case of *Corporate*

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Mobility is a central element of the film *Corporate*, as well as contemporary trajectories that are now defined as successive movements, changes, and new beginnings in modern liquid society (Bauman, 2005).

Emilie Tesson-Hansen was recruited by Esen as a human resources manager. Her mission was to set up the Ambition 2016 plan, which aims at getting rid of some of the company's employees who were considered to be underperforming or too old. Since she cannot dismiss them because of the

company's status, she encourages them to change jobs and move within the group. This forced mobility concerns Didier Dalmat, an internal controller of the group. Following a third refusal from Esen for a position he was applying for within the group, he asks for a meeting with Emilie Tesson-Hansen and goes so far as to wait for her outside of a restaurant. Emilie Tesson-Hansen, overwhelmed, screams the truth to him: 'Let go of me. Don't you understand? We want to get rid of you, Dalmat. We do not want you anymore. We won't offer you

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anything else. So resign. Resign!' Following this altercation, Didier Dalmat commits suicide at his workplace.

How can we understand this suicidal behavior? Is it simply a consequence of the words of this young human resources manager that pushed her to her limits, or is it the product of an injunction to mobility? From 2009 to 2019, what can we learn from the use of internal mobility in companies? Has mobility become a new form of domination in our contemporary neoliberal organizations?

2009: mobility as an incentive in the film Corporate and in the France Télécom Group

Emilie Tesson-Hansen was recruited by the Esen company to do 'the dirty work', as she explains to her husband, Mr. Hansen, during a significant scene in which she simulates a recruitment interview:

> We are looking for a man with balls. Do you have balls, Hansen? We are looking for someone who is not afraid to do the dirty work. But who does it clean? Can you see the profile? …We are looking for someone who can get rid of employees without firing them… Can you do that? You have to be sure of yourself, because you can't make mistakes. So, Hansen, are you the right man for the job?

The mission assigned to Emilie Tesson-Hansen was 'to get rid of employees, without laying them off' through the implementation of the Ambition 2016 plan. As Emilie Tesson-Hansen explained to an employee, the rationale behind the 'Ambition 2016' plan is based on a new proactive attitude that is now required in relation to career building 'in a world that is constantly changing':

> - Emilie: You're 46 years old, you're at a pivotal moment in your career. How do you see yourself in ten years? (…) In two years? In six months? (…) You know, Catherine, we are in a world of constant change. It's very important not to be affected by these evolutions, to know how to anticipate them… How do you see the future?

> - Catherine: I would like to continue working within the team and continue to give the best of myself by working on the points that we have identified together. So…

> - Emilie: There are lots of perspectives within Esen, lots of possibilities to evolve.

> - Catherine: What do you mean? Do you think I should change position?

> - Emilie: I don't want to think of your place, but we can think about it together if you want.

> - Catherine: Are you asking me to move?

As Emilie Tesson-Hansen explains to the French 'Inspectrice du travail', the objective is to 'make the recalcitrant elements move, those who resist change'. To this end, three phases are implemented within the Esen Group:

> -Emilie: Phase 1, behavioural assessments (…). Phase 2: encouraging mobility … it's like asking an employee to put himself in the closet. Phase 3: trench warfare. You want to move, we've got nothing for you. It's up to you to draw the consequences.

> - Labour Inspector: Resign!

> - Emilie: That, we're not allowed to say. The role of HR is to make sure that the employee accepts his fate, not to tell him that we no longer want him.

One cannot help, of course, but make the connection between the film Corporate and the France Télécom affair. The film's 'Ambition 2016' plan mirrors the 'Plan Act', which was the social component of France Télécom's transformation plan. This plan, presented to financial analysts in 2006, aimed at the rapid restructuring of France Télécom in the context of a highly competitive Télécommunications market and a radical transformation in the Group. France Télécom employees were encouraged to move or leave since the Group's management was hoping to cut 22,000 civil servant jobs within 3 years. In addition to other managerial practices used by the Group (work overload, permanent emergency, management by terror, total disorganization of the company, etc.), internal mobility was used as a way of making a creeping redundancy plan in a group where 75% of employees were protected by their status as civil servants. From 2006 to 2008, 10,000 internal mobility movements[3] were made to new priority sectors: ADSL technology, mobile, and commercial positions. By forcing employees to acquire new skills far from their original professions (which was the case for many employees), internal mobility was a vector of stress and a tool for blurring professional identities and destabilizing employees who saw their references disappear (Doublet, 2009). Even if it remains difficult to establish a sociological causal link between the new working conditions at France Télécom and the wave of suicides, there is 'a bundle of converging clues' in favor of this link (Baudelot & Gollac, 2015), or a causal path (Dejours, 2019) that led to the 'suicide crisis' in which 35 suicides occurred from 2008 to 2009 according to the unions and the group's management. The perverted use of internal mobility in the France Télécom group quickly raised awareness. In December 2007, an 'Observatoire du stress et des mobilités forcées' was created in France Télécom on the initiative of academics in sociology and trade unionists (Delmas & Merlin, 2010). In the context of the 'suicide crisis', in 2009, internal mobility was incriminated, and the group's CEO stopped the 'principle of mobility' for employees and opened negotiations with the unions on, among other

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3. L'usine nouvelle, 8 Juillet 2019, *France Télécom, où sont les responsables?*

things, mobility. On December 20, 2019, after a 3-month trial, three former France Télécom executives were found guilty of 'institutional moral harassment' and 'sentenced to one year in prison, eight months of which were suspended, and a fine of 15,000 euros, for having implemented a policy of downsizing 'to the last detail' over the period 2007–2008'.[4]

The film *Corporate* can be analyzed as the denunciation of the misuse of certain management tools in companies, such as internal mobility. Traditionally deployed to increase intraorganizational knowledge transfer, stimulate employee motivation, and build loyalty by offering career prospects within a vast internal labor market (as elaborated by Piore & Doeringer, 1985), internal mobility is used in the film *Corporate* for other reasons. As was the case at France Télécom in 2009, it is designed to push employees to leave, in an insidious way, in the context of business redeployment. The film unveils the mechanisms and political intentions at work in the implementation of internal mobility and the perversion of its use: internal mobility as an incentive for getting rid of employees deemed unsuitable or unwanted.

2019: Mobility as a new injunction in neoliberal companies

Since 2009, the incentive for mobility has become an injunction in companies caught in neoliberal contexts or under neoliberal injunctions, and more generally in the liquid society described by Bauman (2005) and many sociologists. In neoliberal companies, the concept of career proactivity is now part of the new managerial rhetoric. The individuals are now the designers of their careers, initiating and planning actions to achieve their career goals (De Vos et al., 2009). Employees also need to develop a new format for proactive career development through anticipation. The challenge is to invent and put in place strategies in order to prepare for external (and necessarily unexpected) events.

In 1999, Boltanski and Chiapello were already drawing attention to the new spirit of capitalism that celebrates the virtues of mobility and adaptability: 'In a connective world, mobility, the ability to move autonomously, not only in geographical space but also between people or mental spaces, between ideas, is an essential quality of the great ones, so that the small ones are characterized first of all by their fixity (rigidity)' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, pp. 445–446). We are experiencing a 'contemporary valorization of mobility which continues to place responsibility for its future on individuals' (Kaufmann et al., 2012), if not a new exploitation of mobile over immobile ones (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). Mobility is now the essence of the 'kinetic elite' (Costas, 2013), a new

ultra-mobile workforce. The ability to move, a kind of 'movement capital', would now be crucial in contemporary agent-centered career conceptions in a time when spatio-temporal constraints are being erased.

This career proactivity advocated by neoliberal companies is nurtured by a societal injunction to mobility that is now part of the imagination of modernity (Barrère & Martuccelli, 2005). The ability to be mobile becomes an essential key to adapt in the contemporary world of work, which is indeed characterized by steep and often unforeseen changes in circumstances. As a result, individuals can no longer rely on acquired experience but must, instead, learn to walk on shifting sands. In a constant climate of uncertainties, they have to be light, lively, and volatile. Even more, they like to move and see change as opportunities. Careers are now conceived as a series of new beginnings, new projects, and challenges because in today's modernity, characterized by the experience of acceleration (Rosa, 2010), the objective would now be to combine as many experiences and professional lives as possible within a restricted and dead-end life. This new vision of a more fluid society, smooth, and flowing like water, in which people are expected to be always more mobile, leads to revisiting traditional conceptions of space and time and to reorganizing working methods and the content of work. It is a real 'mobility turning point' (Urry, 2005) that is revolutionizing our current society.

Mobility: A new form of domination in neoliberal companies?

A first analysis of the film shows how certain 'corporate' executives, including Emilie, absorb some of the organizational messages, which may be toxic, and transform them into acts of management in organizations. The daily decisions of each of the actors in the film (whether those of HR President Stéphane Froncart or Emilie Tesson-Hansen) can be understood as acts of individual responsibility, according to the neoliberal vision designed by Friedman in 1962, which is that of a world that should only function around a single value: freedom (Bazin, 2017). In companies adhering to this new spirit of capitalism (Sennett, 2006), it is therefore the responsibility of each of the actors of the company to use the management tools and to give them the appropriate meaning according to the strategic objectives of the upper-management. This may explain the distorted use of tools and some mechanisms of perversion. The film can, thus, be seen as an individual moral dilemma on the question of submission and domination in the implementation of HR tools, including internal mobility, in view of serving the goals of a powerful board. To what extent can one sacrifice one's individual values for the benefit of those of the organization without causing too much pain and without suffering too much? To what extent should one be 'corporate'? This is the

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[4.] *Le Monde*, 20 décembre 2019, France Télécom et ses trois anciens dirigeants reconnus coupables de harcèlement moral institutionnel.

ethical dilemma in which today's neoliberal organizations can place their workers. This leads Emilie Tesson-Hansen to be a 'killer', but a 'real one', as she says, one night, a little drunk, in front of stunned managers. To achieve this, the system uses management tools in a devious manner in relation to its initial objectives. It can justify these misuses by the exceptional nature of the situation. This distortion of management tools can contribute to a profound destabilization of the relationship between people and work.

A second form of domination in neoliberal companies results from the new injunction for mobility imposed on workers. While boundaries are disappearing for individuals, their need for reference points remains (Mainhagu et al., 2018), including professional references (the need to have a work identity, as evidenced by the difficulties of professional reconversion) and organizational references (the need for stability, as underlined by the aspiration to have internal careers). The ability to be mobile questions the structure of the resources available to individuals, including the financial capital for taking risks, and their psychological capital. Not all individuals have the ability to transpose their points of reference, their ways of working, or even to move around in a given space (as in the case of geographical mobility). Neither do they all have, at every moment of their lives, the motivational resources they need to push their project: 'change jobs' or change companies. The injunction to mobility would, therefore, weaken employees and create pathologies related to 'the fatigue of being oneself' (Ehrenberg, 2008): stress, anxiety, and depression. Above all, the diffusion of this new mobility norm would contribute to the creation of stratification between workers, including between mobile workers, who constitute the new managerial elites of globalization (Wagner, 2005), and non-mobile workers, who are described as 'reluctant to open up', 'resistant to change', 'reluctant to get involved', and 'not able to seize opportunities' (Borja et al., 2013). While being mobile may benefit some, for others, mobility may weaken them, as illustrated by the claims of French 'gilets jaunes' on the price of petrol. Mobility (spatial mobility in this case) is expensive and can contribute to a form of impoverishment. Mobility has become a new mode of domination in which mobility capital would be a new way of segmenting workers in organizations and social groups according to their age, their capacity to be autonomous and agile, and their disposition to deal with uncertainty, stress, and mental fatigue. As a result, mobility would no longer be one of the drivers of social success but rather an effect of the different forms of economic, cultural, and social capital (Borja et al., 2013) owned by the individuals who move within the geographical and symbolic space of an organization. Viewing mobility as capital (Kaufmann et al., 2012), rather than as an effect of capital, would reinforce the mobility discourse of neoliberal organizations and the segmentation of social groups.

Concluding questions

How can we think about our future organizations to avoid the drama described in the film or experienced at France Télécom and limit the perversions of using management tools in neoliberal organizations? Faced with the uncertainty and instability that characterize our economic environment, how can we strengthen more collective dimensions and develop solidarities while this system generates new forms of domination and fragmentation?

If new career paths are more fluid, they would ultimately lead to questioning of the role of the organizations in modernity. If large companies have been a form of structural fixation opening up stable development paths (thanks to a legal framework, political organization, growth, training courses, and careers), are they not today in the process of turning into a brake or an impediment to modernity because of their rigidity? The liquefaction of the major social institutions undoubtedly invites us to imagine new forms of organization, valuing work that is outside the market economy (Gomez, 2016). Socrates reminds us, in Xenophon's Economics, how important it is to 'take care of the friends and the city'. Perhaps, it is also a return to a form of work limited to a restricted, warmer space, with a sustained attention to others, which was the case for millennia within the estate of the 'household' (*oikos*) in Antiquity.

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Corporate or the Path of Parrhesiastic Truth

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Can I have a word with you Jean-Louis?

- I am all ears.

- We wanted to fire Didier Dalmat. I did everything I could to break him down. We want to fire you as well.

- Is that your defence?

- That's the truth. The Ambition plan is to fire people like you.

Another trade unionist: do you realize what you're saying here?

You're wrong, Tesson. We're the ones who'll fire people like you… Yeah… We'll fire you!

Emily Tesson Hansen spoke this truth to Jean-Louis, a trade unionist who wanted the truth. He pushed her to respond, but he refused to accept the truth. Emily Tesson Hansen is the human resources manager at Esen. At this company, a few days before, Didier Dalmat killed himself. This suicide is the direct consequence of a restructuring program based on questionable management methods. The program consists of encouraging some employees to quit rather than dismissing them. Emily belongs to the select inner circle of persons who are familiar with this practice. She was even recruited for this. Moreover, she insists that the human resources director (HRD), Stéphane Froncard, be reminded:

Stéphane. I did my job. I won't be the one footing the bill.

-And what is exactly your job? Is it to make people screw up themselves?

-We know why you recruited me.

-What are you playing at? Are you threatening me?

-No, I anticipate.

This is from a scene of a movie that echoes what happened at France Télécom, now Orange (see Anne Janand's analysis of mobility as an incentive in the film *Corporate* and at the France Télécom Group). After Emily kept quiet about this plan and was loyal to company, i.e., 'dedicated to the company', as it is noted so well in her last evaluation by the HRD, we discover Emily's thought process leading her to tell the truth about Dalmat's suicide. Among the suicide cases at France Télécom, this suicide reveals a secret. This secret was the subject of an insider's silence, including those (like Sophie, Emily's assistant) who disagreed with such practices; Sophie told Emily at the end of the movie: 'Emily, I didn't do anything against you; I didn't say anything'.

This movie, whose characters are fictional but whose depicted 'management methods are real' (film synopsis written on the DVD), shows us how the human resources manager is gradually switching to a Foucauldian parrhesiastic truth telling when she's telling the truth, which she was driven to by anger at first: 'Let me alone. Don't you understand? We want to fire you, Dalmat. We don't want you anymore. We won't offer you anything else. Then resign. Resign'.

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This scene leads to the following fundamental question: Can human resources managers tell the truth, or should they keep a secret in all circumstances?

The secret, dark side of corporate truth

Froncard requested documents. When you were not there…

- That' s all well Sophie. You must always do what Froncard asks you to do…

As HRD and line manager, Stéphane Froncard pushes Emily to keep a secret, and she must obey his instructions.

If her employment contract does not specify that she must be silent about the mission she was assigned, she is under a moral contract with her organization. She must obey orders and not reveal the truth to nonspecialists. She keeps this truth carefully, and doing so means secrecy (Rouillé, 2004) and intentional withholding of information (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008). By keeping the secret, Emily thinks she is operating as a human resource professional. Indeed, interpersonal professions, such as human resources, require the confidentiality of certain information, as in the professional medical field. This withholding of information can be reflected by confidentiality, as a synonym for secrecy (Grey & Costas, 2016), to protect the personal interests of employees and the interests of their organization (Mandard, 2016).

The cult of secrecy may have different goals: to protect knowledge from laypeople, to avoid professional competition, to respect the privacy of employees, and to preserve the mysteries of the source of power. In the movie, secrecy is used the most as a form of domination and to secure the source of power in a bureaucratic organization. In this movie, domination arises from the secrecy surrounding mobility (see Anne Janand's analysis of mobility as a new form of domination in neoliberal companies).

By approving this job, Emily agreed to submit to this cult of secrecy, and she convinced herself that she was on the right road. Even if she was wrong, she believes she is one of the only people who can distinguish between true and false; this ability is a form of domination in the sense that she believes she has control over what is happening in this bureaucratic organization.

She decides to respect this secret, which becomes a form of power, an instrument of subordination, of enslavement because it allows her to be part of a group (Hannah, 2007) and to be rewarded with a substantial remuneration for keeping the secret. The decision to keep the secret is also part of her professional ethics. However, Dalmat's suicide reveals that she was never ethical (see Yoann Bazin's analysis of 'Business' ethics and corporate disasters) and that she is a hypocrite.

Based on this character's vector, hypocrisy is apparently a necessary function of human resources (Brunsson, 1993). Employees engage in hypocrisy because of the fear of doing their job improperly, the cult of secrecy, and the distortion of reality due to their duty to be hypocrites. Indeed, two organizational models coexist into any firm: organization of action and political organization or formal organization and informal organization. The individual follows the ideology promoted by the organization of action and adopted by the other organizational model (i.e., the informal norms); following this ideology will instill a spirit of enthusiasm, unity, and efficiency rather than criticism and doubt. Ideology then replaces the decision-making process and directly results in action, which is the ultimate goal of any company. The political organization creates legitimacy toward the external environment. The legitimacy of the political organization and its members relies on opposing norms and conflicts. Organizational hypocrisy appears between these two visions and manifests as three types of contradictions: (1) interindividual contradictions, (2) contradictions between ideas and actions, and (3) contradictions between decisions and actions.

In this case, keeping silent about mobility practices fits with the organization of action. Dalmat and Jean-Louis, the trade unionist, represent the political organization because they resist the current mobility practices. The human resources manager's posture reflects interindividual contradictions because Emily promotes corporate goals, and the others refuse to subscribe to such objectives, which are against their own interests.

Thus, many reasons are evoked to explain why human resources managers may be forced to keep the truth to themselves. In the movie, several reasons gradually emerge to justify keeping the secret: one reason is professional duty, which corresponds to a necessary hypocrisy in the aim to maintain the organization of action; the second reason is personal, such as keeping a well-paid job because her husband sacrificed his career for her; this fact may affect his own perception of her. Therefore, Emily persists in being a soldier dedicated to a secret truth. As Eichmann could do in his time (Arendt, 1966), from a Kantian perspective of the categorical imperative distorted from its moral sense, she was being silent about the truth because doing so is her duty. This obstinacy to hide the truth, to deny it to her, makes her appear to be a crazy woman who is reduced to a beast. This degeneration is manifested by excessive sweating, which causes her to change a shirt in the daytime in her car.

This untrivial action reveals that she was driven and lost her freedom while trying to win it. Therefore, she becomes a captive of herself, of 'her' truth: she did something bad by playing a part in the HRD and the management's game.

In Vino Veritas: A stage in the quest for truth

Emily needs to know the truth more than the union leader Jean-Louis, Dalmat's manager, or the labor inspector, who will help her learn the truth. Indeed, she blames herself for Dalmat's suicide because she knows she shouted the truth to him even though

she was not supposed to do so: 'Let go of me. Don't you understand? We want to get rid of you, Dalmat. We don't want you anymore. We won't offer you anything else. Then resign. Resign'.

Unconsciously, she seeks another truth: she wants to know whether she is guilty, but she passes through several stages before being able to recognize her guilt and to undertake her responsibilities in the face of Jean-Louis, first more timidly, then honestly and sincerely. In this movie, therefore, there is a graduation of truth.

• Level 1: The synthetic truth

In *Metaphysics V*, Aristotle explains that the objective is to find the 'supreme phenomenon of truth, and this by going through the degrees of truth' (Schüssler, 2001, p. 141). Our synthetic connections to the objects themselves determine whether we are telling the truth or not by discovering them in our statement.

When she synthetically expresses the angry truth to Dalmat, Emily makes a first step despite herself. In her exchange with her assistant, Sophie, this synthetic truth also appears:

Do you have any drinks?

- Hum. Japanese whiskey.

- Did Vincent offer it to you?

- Yes… Take it.

Thank you. We did our job, Sophie. We have nothing to be blamed for. Especially not you. (Music) No one knows that he had tried to meet me.

• Level 2: The simple truth

Then, under the influence of alcohol, Emily switches to the simple truth that she made a mistake. In front of stunned Japanese managers, while being a little drunk, Emily refers to herself as 'being a killer', 'a real one'. She is proud of it. However, at the same time, she is frightened by this characterization because she knows well how true it is. She vomits her dinner on the sidewalk. She ends up recovering emotions and gradually accepting the truth, the true and simplest truth, while she does not show her emotions, hides them, and represses them so well, especially at the Chamonix seminar, in contrast to her colleagues who are unable to act as 'killers' in simulation.

She simply blindly obeyed a totalitarian and empty system. That is the truth. Dalmat's suicide makes it evident that several truths and several levels of truths coexist within the same organization. Faced with this revelation, she experienced emotional and then cognitive dissonance. Emotional dissonance is the result of a conflict not only between the professional and the representation of one's function but also between the emotional prescription from the organization

and oneself (Rutter & Fielding, 1988). Ethical suffering emerges when employees perform actions that they condemn or that are inappropriate according to their deepest convictions. This kind of job situation is a source of shame, guilt, and even disgust. The nuisance caused to others in the course of her job causes this shame and guilt. This shame and guilt then create cognitive dissonance. This dissonance pushes Emily to seek consonance by any method, including trying to 'save her skin'. By wishing for consonance, she lifts the mask of truth despite herself.

Overthrow the mask of the truth and discover other truths

Emily gradually arrives at a νοειν, at an unveiling of the truth. This unveiling happens when she watches the video recording of the Chamonix seminar and shares the recording with her husband. In this video, we see her as a monster who is ready to do anything to achieve her goal.

- Isn't that a little crass to do that? This is an exercise, but in real life we wouldn't do that, said one seminarian.

- And what life are you talking about? Does anyone else think it's revolting? Do you find it outrageous to help people to take responsibility?… what I find outrageous is to let people rot in denial and lies, no. Let's start again.

At that point, she realized how much she herself was lying in the name of a truth that is nonexistent. Her exchanges with the labor inspector and this videoclip have a mirror effect. Gradually, this effect pushes her beyond her boundaries and moves her from a utilitarian vision of the truth that takes the form of necessary organizational hypocrisy as a way to 'save her skin' to an ethereal and authentic vision of the truth.

What are you doing here? Why don't you ask me the real questions?

- Tell me the questions you want me to ask you, it will be easier.

Indeed, in her quest, Emily thinks primarily of 'saving her own skin':

And if I help you to prove. What's happening to me?

- I imagine your responsibility can be reduced. If you demonstrate that you have obeyed instructions.

- That's not enough for me. If I take risks. I want guarantees.

- What guarantees?

- The guarantee that I won't be prosecuted. I want you to protect me.

In Emily's progress on the road to the truth, the role of the labor inspector is important. The labor inspector appears to Emily as a clear conscience, the one that will gradually

reconcile her with herself and lead her toward an authentic truth; however, the truth is dangerous, and it is especially dangerous to confess the truth to her husband.

What happened?

- Tuesday, we have an employee who threw himself out the window into the courtyard of the building office and died.

- Did you see it?

- I was his manager.

'I was his manager' means that Emily realizes that as a manager, she must be accountable for her actions. In other words, being responsible means being accountable for one's actions, even the most shameful ones. Therefore, Emily is moving toward a truth that is even greater than the one she kept for herself: she acted wrongly and must correct her mistakes. Finally, different truths in nature exist, and the degrees of truth permit realization of their existence.

However, to expose the truth, she will have to prove it, as suggested by the labor inspector.

If I explain to you that Froncard's plan is to get off employees without laying them off.

-It's interesting, but you have to prove it.

The truth is built on evidence, and this evidence represents challenges that guide Emily to a true parrhesiastic statement: the recovery of Chamonix's tapes, reproduction of the mourning curve, videos shown to her husband and given to the inspector, HRD recording, and broadcasting of this recording on the intranet. Indeed, in its etymological sense, 'parrhesia' comes from pan rhein, which means 'to make everything flow': the term means, in a way, to empty one's bag, 'to say everything', 'to hide nothing' (Leclerc, 2001, p. 211).

The parrhesiastic truth, a courage to all trials

Emily is pushed to a parrhesiastic truth telling. 'The parrhesiastes do not reveal to their interlocutor what it is. He reveals it to him or helps him to recognize what to be' (Foucault, 2011, p. 19). The parrhesiastes promote sincerity and truthfulness rather than pursuing the truth itself. The discourse of the parrhesiastes must be precise, sincere, and, therefore, critical. His trademark is outspokenness, which distinguishes him from the other messengers of truth, such as the wise man, the prophet, and the technician. Indeed, Foucault identifies three other ways of truth telling under the appearance of these three figures. The wise man speaks for his own person and formulates general principles of conduct. The prophet delivers to people a

truth that comes from elsewhere. He does not need any courage to state what he knows because its truths originate in the technique he practices.

In this case, using outspokenness, Emily is a parrhesiastes because she reveals to the HRD that he is also a monster.

We know why you recruited me

- What are you playing at? Are you threatening me?

- No, I'm anticipating.

- Oh, I see; so, I sincerely warn you to be careful what you say!

- Thank you for the advice

When she addresses the trade unionist Jean-Louis, that is exactly what she does. However, parrhêsia is not without consequences and is not effective for everyone. When she reveals the truth that Dalmat was looking for, she breaks the golden rule that governs the world of human resources: never disclose confidential information. The HRD who trusted her is then furious. However, fury is one of the symbols of madness, as Foucault explains so well. In his Histoire de la folie (Foucault, 1972, p. 125), Foucault describes this madness as being the one that 'appears as the comical punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption' (Foucault, 1972, p. 35). It is possible to think that she is wrong, that she made a terrible mistake and that she is crazy to have taken this road to the truth. Nevertheless, another interpretation of what is true is that human resources managers are human beings, fallible, and above all; they can become authentic parrhesiastes. Thus, madness would be the prerogative of a direction that is going astray on the right path and not Emily's madness.

'Parrêsia is, in a few words, the courage of the truth for the speaker who takes the risk of saying the whole truth in spite of everything. But it is also the courage of the speaker who accepts to receive as true the hurtful truth he hears' (Foucault, 2011, p. 14).

However, Emily does not become a parrhesiastes without the help of the labor inspector, the figure of the wise man, bearer of the truth, who progressively leads her to it.

When Emily confesses the truth to the trade unionist Jean-Louis, she risks social death, but in a sense, this is what she is unconsciously seeking because the truth is too difficult to resist: she appears to be an instrument of managerial torture.

Her words remind us of the words of Socrates as he was dying. At the hour of imminent death, tongues are loosened and eventually confess the unknowable truth. As death approaches, Socrates chooses not to escape because escaping would be self-denial. He decides to ask to sacrifice a rooster to Aesculapius, as his opponents do, to liberate the spirit. This decision to face death is an act of parrhesiastic truth in the

Foucauldian sense of the word. Indeed, Foucault distinguishes two approaches to the truth: (1) the structures of discourses that are given and received for true and (2) the type of act that manifests the subject, thus telling the truth. It is this second vision of truth that characterizes the parrhesiastes. The truth is that Socrates released his spirit by accepting death and sacrifices the rooster only to respect tradition. Parrhesiastic truth telling is essentially based on a distinction between true and false, and this distinction must always be deconstructed and reconstructed. For Emily, it is the appearance of social death (exclusion from the company even if she chooses to be in the labor inspector's camp or not) that pushes her to perform this almost desperate but liberating act. It is a liberating act but also a life-saving one. Gradually, Emily switches from a true selfish statement, including during the first exchanges with the labor inspector, to an authentic and parrhesiastic statement.

In the first exchange, she's negotiating the truth to save her own hide. Then, she tells the truth by her acts.

Labour Inspector: What are you doing?

Emily: I'm freeing the voices, and at this point, she gives her a flash drive containing the truth.

Labour Inspector: Are you sure this is the correct way? What is it?

Emily: You will see.

She assumes this truth telling and is fully aware of the consequences and risks associated with confessing the truth. In this way, she shows courage like the Foucauldian parrhesiastes. She is not insane; she is courageously facing her faults. She is brave enough to take responsibility for her mistakes when she encounters Dalmat's daughter and looks into her eyes.

Emily: I called you here to tell you that Esen is to blame for the death of your father. One of the goals of the Ambition 2016 plan is to get out of the company without laying-off any employees. As HR, my role was to ensure that your father resigned. I was recruited to do that, and I failed.

Girl: Why are you telling me this?

Emily: I need you to file a lawsuit against Esen. I can give you the contact information for the labour inspector.

Human resources management is very similar to the Foucauldian visions. Indeed, human resources management is based on a strategic vision that places it in this in-between of truth and fallacy through the prism of institutional discourses. In this in-between of the true and the false, it is the conditions of the possibility of a truth, or even several truths of the human resources function, which are at play. First, the human resources functionary knows the shameful truth about mobility. Then, the human resources functionary (either Emily or the

HR director) forced Dalmat to commit suicide by admitting this shameful truth. Finally, the human resources functionary is not the voice of wisdom, as one might imagine at first glance, and this is the hardest truth to hear and about which Emily speaks out. Nevertheless, this truth telling is probably as dangerous as the cult of secret itself because 'to speak the truth of men's concern is to challenge their way of life, to try to test that way of life and to define what can be validated and recognized as good and what on the contrary must be rejected and condemned in that way of life' (Foucault, 1984, p. 138).

Toward an ethical vision of truth

In the interests of the employees still present, Emily tells the truth by transmitting over loudspeakers the conversation recorded with the HRD. The HRD's comments on the Ambition plan and the death of Dalmat, for whose death the HRD is actually responsible, will test Esen's organizational world and its work methods. Emily helps others to understand that these human resources management practices are not respectful of individuals and are at the limit of legality. Furthermore, these practices also open the dangerous way to an altered social environment that will be tense for a moment until new practices are implemented or that the firm explodes. Nevertheless, Emily and her spirit have been saved by this truth telling. This act of courage then encourages Emily to adopt a more ethical vision of herself.

'What is the ethical relationship between courage and truth? Or, to what extent does ethics and truth engaged courage?' (Foucault, 1984, p. 116). Emily's case perfectly illustrates Foucault's answer to this question. Indeed, 'to access to the truth, the subject must be constituted in a certain disconnect with the sensitive world, with the world of fault, with the world of interest and pleasure…' (Foucault, 1984, p. 116). By going beyond her own interest (saving her career and 'saving her skin'), by taking a step back from her professional negligence (revealing to Dalmat the truth about the Ambition plan), Emily is breaking herself free from organizational reality to access a form of truth that is more pure, more ethereal.

Conclusion

If the truth was not revealed to Dalmat, if Dalmat had not committed suicide in the face of this terrible truth, there would have been questions. This exposed secret compromised the legitimacy of human resources, which attempted to be legitimate by keeping the secret. Speaking the truth is never without consequence.

Emily's initiatory quest from secret to the truth leads us to ask ourselves whether truthfulness, however difficult it may be, is not a solution to return more legitimacy or, at least, meaning to a functionary in search of a new life. Indeed, the scandal of

Dalmat's suicide at Esen headquarters and the reasons that pushed him to c this act are a reflection of what is happening in many companies where human resources seem to have trouble being legitimate and where they are criticized and misunderstood (precisely because they play the game of an executive management while not daring to expose the mistruths).

The film *Corporate* questions this depiction of human resources, and the Orange France Télécom trial may well suggest new positions for human resources facing the truth of some managerial practices.

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Business Ethics in Liquid Corporations: Ethical Disasters, Corporate Responsibility, and Organizational Ruins

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> My situation is to be compared to a man who discovers that the ground he hitherto took to be *terra firma* is in fact an island adrift in a vast sea.
>
> John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*

Opening scenes of the movie *Corporate*. An executive retreat held under the snow. An HR meeting to encourage an employee to explore new horizons. An assistant avoiding a phone call her boss does not want to have. At these points, the corporate world is *in order*, everything is going according to *plans*, and everything is *under control*. Offices are *clean* and gray, people *communicate promptly* without shouting, moving slowly, *but efficiently*, from open plans to meeting rooms, and back. Managers are *in charge*, employees *obey*. The 'Ambition 2016

Plan' is moving forward, like *a well-oiled machine*. Everything is reassuringly *organized*.

In this smooth environment, everyone plays their *role* as if the parts were *pre-written*:

'You know Catherine, we are in a continuously mutating world. It's very important not to endure passively these evolutions, to be able to anticipate them', says Emilie, an HR manager trying to get her employee to accept more mobility, 'I can help you with that'. Efficient, polite, helpful, ruthless.

In the background however, there seem to be a few grains of sand disrupting *the cogs of the organizational machine*: 'I understand you are in a hurry, but she is not visible today [...] Listen Mr. Dalmat, I'm going to see with her and I'll get

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back to you right after', says Emilie's assistant, lying. But as long as humans and human interactions can be left at a distance, everything shall remain under control – especially considering their annoying propensity for disruptive affects, messy reactions, inability to comply, and stubborn emotional nature.

Here, one all-too-human organizational cog insists on non-compliance – the already infamous Mr. Dalmat. Shortly after, he breaks the rule of modern bureaucratic role-playing (obedience and limited physicality) and shows up to the office to see Emilie, face-to-face, *corps-à-corps*. She sees him from the restaurant where she is having lunch with a colleague. He is there, standing on the opposite sidewalk, silent. He looks sad, old, bold, badly dressed, and depressed – un*acceptable*, un*professional*, un*employable*… un*usable*. Afterward, when she sees him again in the street, she turns around to avoid his gaze; runs even. In modern workplaces, any real, physical, and unplanned encounter is unacceptable, unbearable, and impossible.

As she literally flees, she will only turn around and acknowledge his existence when he catches up to her, imposing his corporeal existence. This physical presence is instantaneously and inherently violent: 'Have you become crazy!?', she screams, both aggressed and aggressive. In the digital bureaucratic era, corporeality is madness. It disrupts the all-mighty, carefully structured organizational order, and shakes it to its core. 'Calm down. We'll schedule a meeting to see each other', she adds, trying to bring back *some form* of organization, to put some distance and render this ethical interaction *manageable* again.

At some point, he grabs her arm, and all professional conventions break apart. This physical contact is akin to an act of magic, effectively breaking the spell of the managerial *langue de bois*: 'You don't get it? We want to get rid of you, Dalmat. We don't want you anymore, we won't offer anything else. So quit!' She pulls back to free herself. 'Just quit, fuck!'

Next scene. Emilie is changing in her car: wipes her armpits, puts on a clean white shirt – she slips back to a 'clean' *executive uniform*. Back in the office, she plays Candy Crush on her phone, while her assistant eats at her desk. We instantaneously recognize the monotonous, unruffled atmosphere of a corporate office at mid-day: quiet, clean, organized, and in-human. All of the sudden, we hear a sound that could almost fit in the soundscape if it was not for the scream afterward. People rush toward the window, stop, and gather. Some cry. We do not know what happened, but Emilie seems to understand right away. She goes to the bathroom to hide and cry. She might be experiencing a panic attack.

As she comes out, she passes near the window. A body is lying on the floor in front of the windows. We recognize the color of the sweater. Mr. Dalmat killed himself. Nothing is under control anymore.

Managing in liquid times

Written and directed by Nicolas Silhol, the movie *Corporate* is strongly based on real, 'modern' managerial and HR practices in general, and on the case of France Télécom (now Orange) in particular. In the movie, Emilie acts as an agent for 'Ambition 2016 Plan', which consists of encouraging employees to either quit, to increase profits, or accept mobility, in order to lighten the structure – with the added benefit of such encouragement often leading to departure. It is openly inspired by the all-too-real France Télécom's 'Plan Act', which aimed at 'the rapid restructuring […] in the context of a highly competitive Télécommunications market. Group employees were encouraged to move or leave [in order to] cut 22,000 civil servant jobs within three years' (see Anne Janand's analysis of professional mobility as a tool of managerial domination in the same section). Both of these plans strongly embody elements of what Zygmunt Bauman called liquid modernity.

According to Bauman (2000, p. viii), liquidity is the best metaphor to characterize today's modern societies, in which 'change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty'. On this, he echoes Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' (1848) critique of capitalism, because of which, according to them, 'all that is solid melts into air'. As a result, 'modern times found the pre-modern solids [of major institutions like church, family and state] in a fairly advanced state of disintegration' (Bauman, 2000, p. 3). Politically speaking, this liquid modernity is the (more or less) intended outcome of a constellation of decisions and actions that slowly, but firmly, legitimized a rejection of then-present stability and inertia – i.e., solidity.

As a result, there is nowadays a demand and an expectation for people to not only be flexible and adaptable, but to thrive on it too. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this is the by-product a political project aiming at "'releasing the brakes'' […] of deregulation, liberalization, ''flexibilization,'' increased fluidity, unbridling the financial, real estate and labour markets, easing the tax burden, etc.' (Bauman, 2000, p. 5). Consequently, 'we [now] live in a world of universal flexibility' (Bauman, 2000, p. 135) – a world in which the 'Plan Ambition 2016' of *Corporate* fits perfectly.

Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman extended his critique to the role of management in 'the transition from ''solid'' to ''liquid'' phase of the modern era' (Bauman, 2014, p. xvii). He saw the rise of managers to the 'complete mastery of affairs' as the paradoxical attempt of ''hiving off,'' ''contracting out,'' ''outsourcing'' or ''subsidiarizing'' the chores of management' (Bauman, 2014, p. xvii). In what he calls the 'managerial revolution mark two', the domination of management leads to an attempt to avoid any kind of consequences: 'Managerial rewards are no longer viewed as a compensation for the risks and inconveniences of responsibility; the highest rewards tend to coincide nowadays with positions offering unconditional freedom from responsibility and its consequences' (Bauman, 2014, p. xviii).

Building on Bauman's work and metaphor of liquidity in his critique of modern societies, Clegg and Baulemer (2009) asked a key empirical question: 'what happens to the consumers of liquid modernity when they go to work?' What happens is an expectation to embrace the 'Plan Ambition 2016', and accept its impact on human lives.

12.30 am – lunch; 2 pm – suicide; 3 pm – crisis meeting; 4 pm – back to work

Right after Mr. Dalmat's suicide, everyone gathers in a meeting room. In shock, some cry. Some look into the distance, lost. Silence. A manager takes over:

> - 'We are all in shock', he says with a reassuring, calming tone. 'It is a terrible tragedy. So we are going to listen to Patricia who is going to explain the protocol'.

> - 'We'll see that we first need to constitute a crisis team', follows Patricia with a calm, assertive voice. 'Then how to communicate the event to colleagues, to families, to the media. How to organize the support. And finally the administrative duties'.

Here is the organizational answer to the unsettling *disaster*: a predefined, routinized protocol that aims at a return to *bureaucratic order*. The managerialist vocabulary works to put things back in their place, *where they should be* – a smooth world, without texture, open-endedness or dilemmas. The organization tries to reinstate itself: with distance, structure, and roles, and without emotions and despair. It offers to render manageable the aporetic encounter with a situation where a man killed himself because of how he was managed. From the executives' point of view, these meetings and protocols should put an end to the tragedy, close the open-endedness, and manage the crisis.

All interactions among them afterward are about *handling the situation* and *solving the problem*. In the hallway soon after the disaster, Emilie runs into Stéphane, her mentor, who tells her: 'Listen, this falls on you, but you're going to manage. I trust you. You're the best'. She seems both flattered and puzzled. We can almost hear her doubts: 'The best at what?' Handling death and suicide? Empathy? No. The best at *managing* the situation. At putting things back in order.

We move to a video-conference with their boss, who appears on a screen – in a very Wizard-of-Oz fashion. At a distance, yet again. As he asks if it is the first suicide in the company, we get a sense of how distant from the organization he is. He assigns tasks and responsibilities, telling one of the executives about an upcoming investigation by an internal committee: 'That's your problem to deal with'. Interactions are tense, and they sometimes struggle to hide their worries, unease, and shock – but overall, emotions remain *managed*. Relief comes when Emilie mentions that 'some say he was going through

depression'. Stephane reacts with enthusiasm: 'That solves the problem!' Problem solved. Crisis averted. Liability limited. Responsibility avoided.

A Levinassian critique of corporate responsibility

For Zygmunt Bauman, the relationship between corporations and morality is 'hardly a paragon of peaceful, friendly, enjoyable and altogether mutually beneficial cohabitation' (Bauman, 2014, p. xiv). His approach is deeply rooted in Emmanuel Levinas' work, for whom ethics lies in the encounter with the alterity of the Other. In this perspective, responsibility starts with a 'non-indifference to the Other', which calls for an infinite ethical demand and a 'hyperbolic generosity' (Levinas, 1961). This ethics of alterity, in which encounters between human beings remain very much committing and open-ended, is in contradiction with the bureaucratic project of formal roles and procedures, which by definition puts people at a distance and mediates their tentative relationships. As Bevan and Werhane (2011, p. 53) conclude: 'Levinas [asks] us to reconsider the thematization or totality of codes of ethics, rules of stakeholder engagement, good corporate citizenship, and ethical principles. Instead he argues that responsibility arises in the emergent complexity of the encounter with the Other'. As a result, ethics as so conceived appears seldom, if at all, compatible with the rules of business organizations in general, and managerial policies in particular (Bruna & Bazin, 2017).

In this perspective, the very purpose of organizations is to put the Other at a distance, to limit the demands arising from that encounter and compel the Other to compromise. In Bauman's words, 'the taming of moral impulse […] is its latent function, but a function that nevertheless constitutes its original and perhaps principal raison d'être' (Bauman, 2014, p. xiv). By design, organizations are in a quest for effectiveness and efficiency, which makes them inherently problematic in terms of ethics and responsibility. 'To put it simply: they serve the process of cutting down moral responsibility to a manageable size; and of recycling it into a form that is amenable to management' (Bauman, 2014, p. xvi). A process of minimization and convenient reconstitution in which managers do not try to manage people anymore, but rather encourage their subordinates to manage themselves, is to be autonomous and independent.

Diffusing responsibility in the corporate world

The morning after the suicide of Mr. Dalmat. Everyone in the office is understandably and predictably tense. Everything remains calm though, gray, and boring on the surface – but the atmosphere has slightly changed. Sidelong glances, sadness,

whispers, and cries. Although employees are *at work*, it has become impossible for them *to work*. Emilie goes to a woman who is crying.

- 'Catherine, you want to come with us? Talk to the nurse?', she says, trying to empathise, but with a clearly professional tone still in place.

- 'For what? Does me crying bother you? It bothers the others in their work? It's not proactive, is it?' Catherine answers aggressively, pushing back against the attempt of her *manager* to, precisely, *manage* the situation.

- 'Don't torture yourself with this', advises Emilie very calmly.

- At this point her employee is openly insubordinate: 'I shouldn't torture myself with this? I'm the only one feeling bad here!'

Emilie seems to think that her role as a manager is to reassure everyone that they are not responsible, and thus should not feel too bad about what happened – is she maybe trying to convince herself as well? With her assistant, she hints at the fact that, as cogs in the machine, they are by definition not responsible: 'We did our job, Sophie. We have nothing for which to blame ourselves. Especially not you'. After all, how could such a small cog have any real impact? Only executives can have power and influence. Otherwise, why have the corporate chart?

These struggling conversations echo Emmanuel Levinas' conception of responsibility as 'an immanent, incomplete and unpredictable relation between oneself and the Other' (Bevan & Werhane, 2011, p. 53). This inspired Zygmunt Bauman to pay 'great attention to the multiple fractures, the effective atomization, of any such rule of responsibility which takes place in an institutional/organizational project' (Bevan & Werhane, 2011, p. 53). This is exactly what occurs in the world of *Corporate*.

However, this rhetoric crumbles when an outside investigator starts looking around. Early on, she discovers Dalmat's desk, in the far end of the open plan office, right against the department's copy machine and printer, and next to what seems to be the bathroom. 'How did you put it?', she says to Emilie in front of everyone, her tone somewhere between irony and outrage. 'A preeminent place recognized by all?' Quoting the official PR document about Mr. Dalmat out of its managerialist context in this way renders its ridiculous demagogy and ruthless cruelty painfully obvious.

Later that day, Emilie tries to find someone to handle Mr Dalmat's personal effects. No one wants to do it, especially her. No one wants to 'touch', 'see', or 'smell' anything close to this 'dirty work'. As she pressures the middle manager to do it, he goes to an employee who was apparently close to the deceased. 'Jean-Louis, HR wants you to sort out Dalmat's things and give it to the family', the middle manager says in front of Emilie, again overly professional in his tone, referring to her by her bureaucratic function rather than human name. Jean-Louis

reacts immediately by punching the middle manager in the face with a stapler.

As the organization crumbles, the managerial rhetoric appears in all its naked violence, and employees are called to react violently to it. Furthermore, as it crumbles, so does Emilie. We see her constantly changing in her car, wiping her armpits, and putting on deodorant. Her own bodily human nature is becoming a problem, something she cannot hide anymore. The distance from humanity, including her own, becomes harder to maintain – physically and symbolically – in light of the recent disaster.

'Business' ethics and corporate disasters

The subsequent take away we might posit is that for responsibility, and thus ethics, to exist, the organization *must* first crumble. Its predefined rules and roles have to disfunction. It is only once they are disrupted, that human beings can appear behind, beyond, and in-between them. Only then can ethics come to life, liberated from the shackles of compliance and obedience. As Clegg et al. (2007, p. 109) put it, 'ethics will be enacted in situations of ambiguity where dilemmas and problems will be dealt with without the comfort of consensus or certitude'. We need ambiguity for ethics to live.

In Corporate, the crumbling comes from both within Emilie (her growing doubts and eventual whistleblowing) and from without (the suicide of another human being triggering those doubts). Beyond its tragic nature, Mr. Dalmat's suicide imposes humanity back into a corporate world that spent enormous amounts of energy removing its humanity and so being inhuman – i.e., without humans or humanity. A proof of this is found in the reaction of the organization to this unbearable human death: crisis meetings, protocols, negotiations, and overall increase in managerial activity. Humanity threatens the hygienic corporate order and leaves its agents lost, questioning everything, in crisis. Only the managed order of the organization can rescue them.

A crisis, however, is not the proper term here. Dalmat's suicide is not just akin to 'low probability/high consequences events that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization' (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Sadly, his suicide is an *expectable* by product of the *normal* pursuit of the 'Ambition 2016 Plan'. What happens for the human beings in that organization instead is, in the purest sense of the term, an ethical *disaster*.

What does this mean? asks John Caputo in his beautiful *Against Ethics*. His answer is that 'to suffer a disaster is to lose one's star (dis-astrum), to be cut loose from one's lucky or guiding light […] That the star-guide stories that take us by the hand through the storms and tempests of factical life have lost their credibility' (Caputo, 1993, p. 6). Here, he emphasizes the importance of disasters as a reaction to Immanuel Kant's admiration and reverence for 'the starry sky above [him] and the

moral law within [him]' in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant, 2002[1788]), p. 203). 'That is very beautiful […] I myself would have to say that I have for some time now contemplated the unpleasant prospect that life is a disaster' (Caputo, 1993, p. 6).

But is disaster necessarily a catastrophe? In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot recognizes that it 'disorients the absolute', thus putting us through a difficult time (Blanchot, 1986, p. 4). It is, however, also 'a gift', as it is 'not somber; it would liberate us from everything if it could just have a relation with someone' (Blanchot, 1986, p. 5). As challenging as they can be, ethical disasters are thus not necessarily to be avoided or rejected. When they happen, one should consider his or her potential relationship with them. This is indeed a necessity, because eventually, 'it is a dark disaster that brings the light' (Blanchot, 1986, p. 7).

As ethical disasters ruin our well-ordered, inhuman organization, they offer the possibility for responsibility and ethics to reappear. Indeed, only once everything crumbles in and around Emilie, will she be able to face the ethical dilemma between corporate compliance and rebellious whistleblowing – only then will she consider the possibility to tell her truth, or rather to find the courage to 'overthrow the mask of the truth', as Lidwine Maizeray puts it in her analysis in the same section.

Before an ethical disaster, responsibility in bureaucratic organizations is akin to the impossible. As a result, ethics and responsibility do not occur *within* organizations, but only in their post-disaster ruins. Indeed, disasters always leave ruins of some sorts – 'drifting debris', in Blanchot's words. In these ruins, one still not only finds traces of the organization – by definition – but also finds herself or himself free from its expectations of submission and compliance. Parts of the cognitive and normative frames remain, but they have lost their illusionary, yet very performative, coherence. The organizational cogs are 'out of joint'. As Roth (1997, p. 2) says, 'ruins resist their own decay because they persist, but not too well'.

Wandering the ruins, past actions, and actors are absent, but still present, performing ghostly influences on newly freed human beings (Bazin & Leclair, 2019). As meaningful fragments (De Cock & O'Doherty, 2017) that have lost their doxic powers, ruins can now serve as potential resources for actors to encounter the Other and face its call for hyperbolic responsibility. In the ruins of organizations, ethics appear.

A concluding paradox on business ethics and liquid organizations

The structure of this article echoes my own ambivalence as an author regarding the nature of ethics, hence 'ethical wanderings'. On the one hand, this paper clearly engaged Zygmunt Bauman's central thesis concerning liquid modernity: we now live in a world in which collective institutions have been weakened to a point where individuals find themselves alone in the

face of perpetually precarious surroundings. On the other hand, the corporate environment was presented as being incompatible with what I consider to be a 'true' ethics, strongly influenced by Emmanuel Levinas' work (Bruna & Bazin, 2018). However, Bauman cannot have it all: which one should it be? A world of liquid organizations in which ethics can appear, or one of rigid bureaucracies that offer a collective and a sense of belonging to individuals, but no more than that? This seems to call for choosing a side in order to ground business ethics in something.

I refuse to resolve this apparent paradox by acquiescing to its apparently fixed boundaries. Instead, I chose to position myself *against* business ethics – inspired by John Caputo's (1993) *Against Ethics*. This position is purposefully built on the ambiguous polysemy of the word *against*, which can mean both *opposed to* and *all the way close to*. In particular, if business ethics tries to 'keep its house in order' (Caputo, 1993, p. 7), I would suspect it as being used as a managerial tool and so would immediately oppose it. If people in a multinational corporation genuinely tried to create situations in which ethical issues 'are made visible and discussed as complex problems' (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117), then I had consider their engagement to be commendable.

The managerial project of liquefaction of the corporation is often accompanied by a discourse about values and duties, encouraging subordinates to commit themselves to the corporate culture (Willmott, 1993). As a result, business ethics has become akin to a *grand récit* (Lyotard, 1979), which necessarily demands taking critical distance. However, at the same time, I have argued that social institutions, without which collectives cannot exist, are by definition partly taken for granted, i.e., *not* subject to critical distance. This represents a clear paradox to square, or find one's way between.

Here again, Caputo (1993, p. 9) can help us with his emphasis on 'the scandal of obligation – in the form of a dilemma'. Specifically, there are situations – corporate, social, or otherwise – in which we feel obligated, for reasons that can be rationalized as much as profoundly emotional. For these, John Caputo tells us justification cannot simply rely on deeper origins or higher authorities. This obligation is never easy and obvious; otherwise, we would not notice it. The scandal of obligation lies instead in the creation of a dilemma, an unresolvable problem that needs to be resolved. Importantly, this impossibility to resolve can perfectly occur within a bureaucratic organization, when rules and demands clash among each other. It can also emerge from completely liquid environments in the face of total uncertainty. There may be a path out of the paradox, in other words, if our 'solution' matches the contours of its liquidity.

In the end, the question is not whether this author prefers one tension to the other – although he might have an opinion about it. What the movie *Corporate* perfectly illustrates instead is the kind of promising situations this approach to business ethics occasions: it is when we lose our guiding stars, when we

face an ethical *dis*-aster, that true dilemmas occur, that comfortable grand narratives crumble, and that *our* ethics can actually come to life.

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