

THE
PINK MACHINE PAPERS

#25 – N° 4 / 2005

ZAP – Or Management and the Feeling of Omnipotence

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The Pink Machine Papers

ISSN 1650 - 4062
Stockholm, 2005



1. Doing something.

Bertrand Russell refers in his book “Power” (Russell, 1938) to Bruno Mussolini’s account of his experiences during the Abyssinian war, Fascist Italy’s dress-rehearsal for the Second World War. Bruno Mussolini, the son of Benito, was a fighter pilot in the Italian air force:

“Our task was to set the tree-clad slopes, the fields and the small villages on fire ... It was all highly diverting ... Our bombs had hardly touched the ground before they burst into white smoke and enormous flames to start the dry grass burning. I thought about the animals: God how they ran .. When our bomb-racks were empty I began to throw bombs out by hand ... It was spiffing: a large zariba surrounded by tall trees made a difficult target. I had to aim carefully at the straw roof and only managed with my third shot. Then the poor people who were inside saw that their roof was on fire and ran away like madmen

Surrounded by a ring of flames, about five thousand Abyssinians faced a slow death. It was like a veritable inferno.” (Russell, 1938, p. 26-27)

There he flies, Bruno, high above the landscape and below him savages are running round and round like confused ants. Like Thor, the god of thunder, he roars across the heavens. He can see the small insects rushing blindly around below, he reaches out his hand and throws a bomb that explodes a few seconds later in fire and destruction. It is his skill, his force, his power and his will that explode in close-knit union below him.

“Diverting”, “spiffing”? We must not allow ourselves to be confused by the language, Italian translated into the idiom of 1939. It was quite simply great, brilliant. Any ten-year-old playing computer games could identify with this. Bruno had simply managed to get hold of all of the resources offered by computer games. He sees his enemies a long way off, he stretches out his hand and points – and annihilates them in a thunderous explosion. It is all about enjoyment and excitement – delight in the remote impact of extracorporeal powers. It is all about the feeling of doing something, of acting.

And that is the theme of this essay.

What exactly do business managers do? This question can be answered in different ways. We can enumerate the various activities that managers actually perform during their work: they write, they talk to other people, they take taxis to meetings, they sit in conference, they have lunch with representatives of other companies, they attend charity events, etc. Ever since Sune Carlsson’s studies of managers, we have had a pretty good idea of the patterns of activity of the average business manager.

However, few managers would themselves describe their work in this way. Nor, we must assume, do the heads of large companies pocket their millions and their options as remuneration for talking to someone on the telephone or sitting in meetings with other people. A



board meeting and a pensioners' get-together are totally different events, even if what goes on at both can be described as "a group of people talking".

What business managers "do" cannot, in other words, be described in any meaningful way by determining the pattern of their activities. Something else is needed. This applies of course not only to business managers, it applies to everyone. From a modernist, academic perspective it may appear natural to study the activities as such. They are, in the basic positivistic empirical meaning, observable and measurable. Even so the activities, the movements, are not enough. This is pointed out, for instance, by Ragnar Rommetveit (Rommetveit, 1980) when he quotes "Menzel's mystery", i.e. Menzel's question about what Mr Smith is really doing out there on the grass pushing a lawnmower in front of him.

"... while it is (almost unquestionably) true that Mr. Smith is mowing his lawn, there are a number of other things which he is also doing by the same behaviour:

he is beautifying his garden;

he is exercising his muscles;

he is avoiding his wife;

he is conforming to the expectations of his neighbours;

he is keeping up property values in Scarsdale;

and he is angering his new neighbour, Mr. Ifabrumliz, who prefers to sleep late and feels that Smith's mowing is a criticism of his, Ifabrumliz's unkempt law" (Rommetveit, 1980, pp. 113–114)

So what Mr Smith is really doing is a trifle unclear. On the other hand, what he is not in any meaningful way doing is only and exclusively "pushing a lawnmower backwards and forwards over a level area covered by grass". This example is admittedly misleading because the activity seems so unambiguous that we can without the slightest hesitation reformulate it as "he's mowing the lawn". This means that we immediately ascribe to him an intention – "mowing the lawn". We make what we believe to be the logical conclusion that what Mr Smith is doing is "mowing the lawn".

It is not however merely his intention that defines what Mr Smith is really doing, how others assess his activities will also play a role. Thus in the example above we can see how, perhaps without even thinking about it, in his activity he is doing all the other things as well – such as maintaining property values in Scarsdale. He may have intended to do so, or maybe not. He may also be disturbing his neighbour without realising it.

It is this kind of problem that has prompted Clifford Geertz to develop Gilbert Ryle's discussion of what actions really mean, in which he emphasises the importance of what he calls "a thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Ryle imagines two boys sitting in a café winking at each other – "two boys rapidly contracting their eyelids". What are they really doing? The answer is that they could be doing almost anything at all. A gust of wind may possibly have blown in some dust from the street outside and they are blinking it out of their eyes – a reflex blink. They may be winking conspiratorially – "did you see the girl in the kitchen!". They may be practising winking – imagine being able to wink as superciliously and cleverly as Clint East-



wood. They may be winking “OK, let’s split”, or “I’ll hold him down while you take his wal-let”. Indeed, the contraction of the eyelids, which can be measured empirically and positivistically, on the whole tells us nothing at all, apart from the purely physiological information that the boys are alive. Beyond that we have no idea of what they are up to, in the sense of what they are doing. A blink can mean anything at all.

From this Geertz draws the practical methodological conclusion that in studying human activities simple measurements are not enough. If we want to understand what people are really doing, we have to focus on the broad, thick descriptions. It is easy to concur with this idea.

From the perspective adopted here, however, what is mainly interesting is that actions are not a matter of mere motoric activities but a complex, composite series of such activities. We are dealing with integral activities such as “bombing Abyssinian villages”, “annoying Mr Ifabrum-liz”, “maintaining property values” or “increasing market shares”. What these integral activities really are cannot be determined objectively and unambiguously. Depending on the perspective adopted and the context assumed, a specific sequence of motoric activities may indeed be interpreted very differently.

2. Intention.

The perspective that primarily defines an action, especially in Ryle’s case, is therefore the intention that underlies it. A blink can be many different things, depending on the intention of the boys. They are “doing” quite different things. And in Menzel’s mystery we have to imagine that Mr Smith has some kind of intention with his actions in the garden. It is also quite conceivable that he has a number of intentions at the same time – or maybe something totally different

The only thing that does not seem totally probable is that Mr Smith is walking around on his lawn pushing a lawnmower without any intention at all. In the case of blinking, the motoric activity is so simple – a contraction of the eyelids – that it could be considered to be an unconscious reflex. However, the complexity of mowing a lawn makes an interpretation of this kind totally improbable.

But let us view the question from a different angle. The discussion above implies that when we want to determine what an action actually is, we are more interested in the intellectual components behind the action than in its purely physical form and effects. This may seem paradoxical. In some way after all, one would think, the material circumstances and processes should have some significance, irrespective of what those involved may “think” or be assumed to “think” in this respect. For some reason however, this is not how everything works.

The reason for this can probably be found in the fact that human beings are social animals. This means that all the time we see ourselves in relation to others. In addition, people are thinking creatures, creatures whose perception of social relationships takes the form of “intellectual understanding”. All the time we seek to explain the activities of others, all the time we are explaining our activities to other people. Above all human beings are garrulous animals – Homo Garrulus – exchanging opinions and thoughts in their constant small talk (see



Gustafsson, 1994). We are continually chatting to each other and – more to the point – continually chatting about each other. We evaluate each other verbally, we exchange assumptions about opinions and intentions. We appraise each other and gauge our appraisals through conversation. All the time we are guessing the intentions of others, we are trying to understand the activities of others. This is how order is upheld in the community and how we make it possible to live our lives. Without this constant understanding – or the feeling of understanding – almost no aspect of what we reckon to be a reasonable life would be possible. (MacIntyre, 1985, Gustafsson, 1994)

When we talk about “action” we are therefore talking about “reasonable” or rationally determined activities, i.e. about activities as they can be understood from a generally reasonable, rational perspective. Here we have to reverse our perception of the entire issue: the extent to which something can be understood by others, the extent to which it is comprehensible, is what is reasonable, practically logical. Reason is quite simply a depiction, a summation, of what can be expressed by one individual to another and understood. Our shared understanding constitutes general common sense.

In this light it could be maintained that throughout human history there has been constant discourse and speculation about the issue of comprehensible and reasonable action. This is what Aristotle is doing (Aristotle 1980) when he expounds what he calls practical wisdom, i.e. the rationality with which human beings cope with the everyday activities of life. How does one know all that one believes one knows about what should or should not be done in the various situations of life? His answer, according to Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1990) is that this knowledge is something that comes with age and experience. One quite simply learns in the long run how things are related to each other.

The structure of practical reason is usually described by the practical syllogism in which two premises can by means of a logically rational choice mechanism create an action-logic sequence. This can be illustrated by a scene from practical life – borrowed from von Wright, 1967: a man arrives at his frozen house

- A man wants to heat his house
- He knows that lighting a fire will heat the house
- Thus: he lights a fire

The reasoning is clear and easy to understand. Faced with a similar situation we would do the same thing. The whole sequence offers a typical example of practical common sense. At the same time it forms what we could regard as the principal foundation of rational thinking, the logic of rational action. In the management sciences we find what is in many respects the most highly developed theory of practical rationality. What managers do, we can then say, is that as rational people they want something, they know something and they then make the best choice. It is no more complex than that.

The first premise in the syllogism consists of a “want”, which in the terminology of theoretical economics is called “the decision maker’s preference function”. The second premise refers to her or his “knowledge” of the potential alternative actions and their outcomes – weighted



in terms of reliability, risk and uncertainty. Here, it would appear, we have the kernel of economic logic, the logic of practical rationality. The decision, the rational common sense, will then merely be a “technical” tautology, a trivial logical deduction from the two premises.

While I was a postgraduate student one of my fellow-students, a mathematician by profession, maintained relentlessly that “all you need to be a good business manager is to know mathematics”. This claim made such a deep impression on me that I can still remember it 30 years later. Admittedly he never became a business manager himself, but a university professor. Even so, I think he missed the point somewhere.

Because the first premise, “want”, is not entirely without problems. It can admittedly be rephrased to the more scientific sounding “preference function”, but there are also other synonyms that work: “intention”, “need”, “motive”, “goal”, “feeling of usefulness” or “utility” – a rose by any other name. In the second premise “knows” can also be replaced by “believes”, “guesses”, “assumes”, “imagines” or “supposes”. Above all the problem for many people is not always concentrating on wanting and knowing but on knowing what to want – and also not always wanting to know.

The mistake my mathematical colleague made, I believe, was to confuse the map with the terrain. He imagined that human actions take the same form as talk about human actions. Our tendency to describe and analyse actions in the stringent terms of intellectualised rationality does not, however, necessarily mean that action, the actual contextually determined deeds of active individuals, always follows the same elegant trajectory as our intellectual analysis.

Human decision making and action has been described since Descartes (and therefore since the earlier progenitor of his ideas, Plato) as an exclusively intellectual activity. This conception seems to enjoin us to disregard any underlying needs and drives that may prompt the actions of every individual. These are transformed in rational people into intellectual parameters, to “preferences” and “benefit functions”, which can then be dealt with as required by the mechanistic logic of the practical syllogism. Or, if they have not yet been measured and rendered manageable, that is what we should focus on doing.

An entire sector, indeed nearly an era, in business studies thinking has faithfully followed this classically modernistic lead. Management has been seen persistently as an exclusively intellectual activity. Sometimes this has even been taken so far that individual actors have been neutralised to become no more than countervailing functions in the rational operations of decision making systems. It is from this perspective that we can understand the attention aroused by the contribution made by Herbert Simon (Simon, 1958, March and Simon, 1958) to business studies debate in pointing out the obviousness of the “bounded rationality” of the economic decision makers and that we should therefore structure our theoretical perception of the human actors on this basis. People had managed to persuade themselves, perhaps merely through an intellectual oversight, of the possibility of the existence of a totally rational human being.



Even the problem of knowing what one wants is converted in this approach to an intellectual enquiry. By relating the specific situation to a more globally applicable general preference function – “what do you want to do with your life – maximise it, of course” – it is assumed that an objectively rational desire can be deduced. “In other words: in this context this is what you should want!”

3. Body and feelings.

However, my interest here is not the limitations of rationality but its extensions. Commonsensical rational thinking, as it is mainly dealt with in economic theory, is not enough to describe economic activities. Management is not exclusively a question of intellectual operations. It does not matter how well you think – if you take no action, nothing will come of it. At the core of conceptions about reason and rationality lie actions that are based in reality and which can change it.

Some years ago Antonio Damasio (Damasio 1994) aroused some attention with his book *Descartes’s Error* in which he used physiological studies of the brain to support his claim that purely intellectual rationality does not and cannot exist. It is always linked to the physiology of the living body’s emotional system.

Damasio uses the dramatic example of Phineas Gage, an American railwayman. In 1848, when he was 25, an accidental explosion blew an inch-thick iron bar through his skull. The bar entered at an angle from below and the explosion was so powerful that it then flew a further 30 metres or so. Even though the accident destroyed parts of his brain – a picture of the skull with a large hole in it is included – Gage survived. He did not even lose consciousness. Eventually he recovered to live for many years. Afterwards he was also able to speak, reason, discuss and express himself rationally in every other way. However he was transformed from what had once been a well-adjusted individual to a social catastrophe. His most significant handicap was that despite his ability to reason he lacked any capacity for rational action. He could not make decisions, his actions were erratic, inconsistent and irrational in every way. He lacked the capacity to plan and control his life.

What had happened, Damasio claims, and he cites not only the dramatic fate of Gage but more modern cases of brain injury as well, was that the injury had eliminated the section of Gage’s brain in which “feelings” are dealt with. Without this emotional centre Gage lacked the ability to “feel” anything. In being unable to feel he lost the capacity to act rationally, even though he continued to be able to talk rationally about rational actions. You could say that Phineas P. Gage had been transformed into “economic man”, that he had become economic theory.

The general thesis that Damasio deduces from all this is that nothing that resembles autonomous human reason can exist independently of the body in which it lives. Quite the opposite, he asserts, thoughts and emotions constitute an indissoluble entity of mutual recursiveness. As its title, *Descartes’s Error* suggests, the book is a contribution to the never-ending debate on “body versus soul”, on “feeling versus thought”. In his opinion Descartes’s error is



“the abysmal separation of body and mind, between the sizeable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizeable, undimensioned, un-pushpullable, nondivisible mind stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgement, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body.” (Damasio, 1994, p. 249-250)

The question is not therefore one of a dichotomy between thought and feeling but a unity thought/feeling:

“...there may be a connecting trail, in anatomical and functional terms, from reason to feelings to body. It is as if we are possessed by a passion for reason, a drive that originates in the brain core, permeates other levels of the nervous system, and emerges as feelings or nonconscious biases that guide decision making. Reason, from the practical to the theoretical, is probably constructed on this inherent drive by a process which resembles the mastering of a skill or craft.” (Damasio, 1994, p. 245)

Actually, this is not so surprising after all. As Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (Johnson, 1987, Lakoff, 1987, Lakoff and Johnson, 1980. See also Gustafsson, 1980) demonstrate, language, indeed words in themselves, in terms of their meaning and comprehension are intimately linked to the body and to feelings related to the body. And this is also true of the way we use language, we understand with our bodies.

From a certain perspective we should however be able to view pure reason as independent of the individual, as a cultural product. Your ability to read is not the result of genetic programming, which would mean that the ability to read developed at a certain age. On the contrary, reading has to be practised for a long time and conscientiously, often reluctantly and through compulsion. After many years of such endeavour, moreover, you have merely learnt to read one or a few of the world’s languages. This is how you inherit your language and your reading ability, you receive it from the surroundings you happen to find yourself in. Nor do you learn to count spontaneously. What happens instead has been described by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1967, p.4) like this:

“Counting (..) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives. And that is why we learn to count as we do: with endless practice, with merciless exactitude; that is why it is inexorably insisted that we shall all say 'two' after 'one', 'three' after 'two' and so on. . . . it can't be said of the series of natural numbers — any more than of our language — that it is true, but: that it is usable, and, above all, it is used.”

The same obviously applies to virtually everything included in what we normally refer to as “rational common sense”, developed into methods, algorithms, norms and ideas, and learnt through intensive schooling and practice. Here we are dealing with conceptual models created by others, often step-by-step from one generation to the next. Certain clear-cut contributions can be discerned – Plato, Aristotle, Newton, Wittgenstein, or Smith, Marx, Keynes,



Friedman and, why not, Fredrick Winslow Taylor and Bill Gates – but they too merely developed ideas they had received from others. An individual's innate capacity for reason most often allows no more than learning by trial and error, which seldom generates abstract knowledge and even more rarely results in the development of conceptual models. What we have is a culturally determined, extremely sophisticated and fine-honed way of reasoning that has been produced by thousands of generations one after the other and which is not inherent in our brains but in the culture in which this little brain has been born. How this works has been described in an elegant metaphor by Kenneth Burke (Burke, 1957, p. 94) in answering his own question about where all narratives come from:

“From the ‘unending conversation’ that is going on in history when we are born. Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, when the discussion is still vigorously in progress.”

In some way this immaterial and abstract “mass of rationality” encounters the material in the human brain. It not only encounters the brain, it acquires its meaning, its life there. The models of rational thought are linked through the emotional system to the body – “from reason to feelings to body”. Rational common sense admittedly exists, but in itself it lacks life and meaning. Linked to the body through feelings, it acquires meaning and leads to understanding and action. Damasio, however, only half answers the question of how this occurs.

Every researcher has enjoyed an “aha-experience”, the feeling of pleasure that comes from sudden intellectual insight, after all that is why we continue our research. It would appear to be self-evident that it also has a physiological, emotional element – restlessness, rapid breathing, a heady feeling of pleasure and joy. It may well be that the mental activity linked to intellectual insights releases endorphins. Rational thought may be a mild addiction to endorphins – “a passion for reasoning”. Rationality only comes to life in the body.

4. The extended arm.

However, not even the body is a totally unambiguous and unproblematical material phenomenon – i.e. only and unequivocally consisting of and limited to flesh and blood. It exists to the same extent as an immaterial image of itself in the senses. And at the emotional and intellectual level this image is at least as important as its material existence. In his book “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat” the neurophysiologist Oliver Sacks describes the different kinds of “phantom experiences” felt by his patients. This expression denotes the



phenomena linked to an individual's internal feeling of the existence and workings of her or his own body. It often happens that people who have lost a limb, a leg for instance, will continue to feel for a long time afterwards that it is still there. Not only do they feel that the leg is still there, they even feel pain, heat and cold, in the non-existent leg. Sacks quotes one patient whose leg had been amputated:

“There’s this thing, this ghost-foot, sometimes it hurts like hell and the toes curl up, or go into spasm. This is worst at night, or with the prosthesis off, or when I’m not doing anything. It goes away when I strap the prosthesis on and walk. I still feel the leg then, vividly, but it’s a good phantom, different – it animates the prosthesis, and allows me to walk.” (Sacks, 1986, p. 66)

This “phantom” is, Sacks notes, not merely negative. On the contrary it is vital if the patient is to be able to use the prosthesis. Without the phantom experience he has no feeling that the prosthesis is his leg. Without that feeling he cannot use it to walk. Sacks describes the case of one patient who has to strike the stump of his amputated leg repeatedly every morning to “wake” the non-existent leg so that he can walk using his prosthesis.

The capacity for phantom experiences is obviously, however, not only restricted to limbs that have been lost. Human beings have the ability to create phantom experiences outside their own bodies. An excavator driver, for instance, eventually learns how to handle the two or three ton excavator jib as if it were an extension of his own body, his arms and hands: he stretches out his arm, gropes around, lifts, balances and moves enormous rocks with it. It is sometimes claimed that excavator drivers show off their skills by using the shovel to roll and lift fresh eggs without damaging the shell. They also use the jib as a kind of extra foot for support when they have to move the excavator in confined spaces. A skilful driver can climb rocks in his excavator. He does not feel that he is “driving” a large machine but more as if he was “stretching out his arm” to “dig”.

Every experienced motorist has had the same feeling. Only when your body and your car have fused into a spontaneous, automatic unit can you feel that you are really “driving”. The joy of driving also rests in the feeling that the car is an extension of the body and of its powers – a feeling of spatial motoric capacity. As Erik Ryding (Ryding, 1979) points out, our I includes our cars: off I go, I accelerate, I skid, I collide, I got a dent.

Another analogous form of extracorporeal phantom extension can be found in different kinds of shooting. An experienced marksman does not take aim. He raises his rifle which then forms a unit with his body, and squeezes the trigger. This is why the shape of the stock is so important – “the barrel fires but the stock takes aim”. The stock has to sit correctly, fit properly against the shoulder. The marksman is unable and has no time to check this, he merely points his extended arm at the target. The trajectory of the hail of lead is for him an extension of his vision and feeling – he kills with a look. Like Thor, the god of thunder, he casts a thunderbolt at the bird in flight; he reaches out and “plucks it from the sky”.

This is where we meet Bruno Mussolini. Aiming a dart is just as much of a ballistic whole as shooting. Hitting panic-stricken fleeing Abyssinians with bombs is too. Somewhere Ronald



Reagan, the former president of the USA, is described as expressing his great delight that all small American boys were playing computer games. A good way of learning to shoot is quite simply to point your finger and say “bang”. All the manuals on shooting also recommend daily “sighting exercises” – like practising swimming on dry land. Look at the quarry, close your eyes and raise your gun. Then you open your eyes to see how well your body managed to aim. This is how to train and limber up the ballistic motor skills of the phantom body. Reagan imagined that by spending all their spare time in front of a computer screen and fixing their sights on enemy targets, an entire generation of young American boys were already acquiring a feeling for modern air warfare. You stretch out your electronic-ballistic-motoric arm: “ZAP – down goes a Mig”.

One of the characteristics of the human brain is obviously an advanced, sophisticated and broad ability for extracorporeal sensations, phantom feelings. Our motoric, spatial and social reality is shaped to a great extent by these phantom feelings. At the same time we must not delude ourselves into believing that these experiences are, as it were, automatically inscribed in our genes, that they are genuinely organic. On the contrary, all the examples cited above show that we are dealing with entities of feeling that have developed as a result of prolonged training and experience – as “a skill or a craft”. (And it is worth noting that this also applies to animals. The ability of a cat to capture a mouse in one lightning and precisely targeted leap is the outcome of thousands of clumsy and unsuccessful attempts as a kitten).

The idea I am attempting to suggest, quite hypothetically, is that human “emotional intellect” has a capacity, indeed a tendency, to relate to immaterial and abstract phenomena through the medium of extracorporeal “phantom feelings”. Actually it is wrong to refer to this as phantom feeling, after all it is more a question of the structure of the normal experience of reality. Existential and action-related experiences are extracorporeal by nature.

5. Out through the window.

Descartes’ error was to see the body and the soul as discrete entities, separate from each other. We should rather consider that reason functions as a combination of an immaterial rationality, on the one hand, that is autonomous from the individual and, on the other, the system of emotions that gives it life.

“Rationality” in its strict meaning is not to any great extent a matter of individual characteristics. It can rather be seen as a basic structure in a cultural system. Individuals “imbibe” – imitate, assimilate, learn – the reason that exists in the culture. They combine this with their emotional systems, otherwise they would not be able to accept it. In this combination abstract reason acquires life and meaning.

I would also claim that there is another mistake inherent in the Cartesian picture. It creates the impression that individuals are restricted to the physiological boundaries of their own bodies. Earlier scientific and medical works dealing with human beings, body and soul, often contained elaborate illustrations portraying a tiny homunculus, the soul, sitting inside the head and directing everything. Often the concept was depicted even more graphically by lines



that show how the external environment is focused by the lens of the eye to form a reflection in the inner camera obscura that is then observed and analysed by the homunculus inside.

What we are really being shown by this image is the conception of mankind sketched by the Cartesian model of reason, a rational soul incarcerated behind a window through which it observes existence. This can only be reached if the soul directs the physical implements – arms, legs, etc. The Cartesian rational soul therefore lacks not only feelings and life, it is also isolated and alienated. It is cut off from the reality around it and has to rest content with mere observation through its closed window.

And here, I would like to maintain, lies the other Cartesian error. In reality, the window is open and the body-soul is reaching out through it. From birth onwards, life consists largely of learning. In this way we acquire not only culture and reason, but we also learn how to make contact with our environment. Assiduous training enables the phantom limbs of thought and feeling to reach out to the world around us, to experience different things, trees and bushes, mountains and lakes, distance and nearness, threat and refuge. They also learn all the social relationships, they embrace culture with phantom sinews and phantom muscles in the form of power and ethics, responsibility, desire, understanding, empathy, fear, anger, steadfastness, etc. They learn to perceive links and functions, they develop the capacity to predict spontaneously, “ballistically”, not only the trajectory of a ball in flight but also the activities and patterns of activity of other people. They “sense” market trends and fluctuations in the stock exchange. They feel the economic dynamics in the fields in which they operate.

In this way power and management means that the imaginary phantom bodies extend into the environment, incorporate other people. They encompass them, include them as part of themselves. If we start to muse about metaphors, for instance, we may wonder how Charlemagne, “Charles the Great”, acquired his name. If the appellation had nothing to do with his physical build – and the same epithet has been applied to many great commanders, as well as painters and philosophers irrespective of their height or weight – one can wonder what justified describing him as “great”. In what way is a “great man” great? My inference is that the meaning of the expression lies partly in the understanding of the extracorporeal or physical extension of the phantom body that can be found in exercising power over others.

In this way, therefore, economic activities will never be devoid of feeling, the neutral rational operations that theory would like to envisage. Managing companies, doing business, always involves powerful extracorporeal emotional content. The business executive stands like Darth Vader in Star Wars – He stretches out his hand and the glowing crystal he holds, he aims at his target – ZAP!



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Pink Machine is the name of a research project currently carried out at the Department of Industrial Economics and Management at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. It aims to study the often forgotten non-serious driving forces of technical and economical development. We live indeed in the reality of the artificial, one in which technology has created, constructed and reshaped almost everything that surrounds us. If we look around us in the modern world, we see that it consists of things, of artefacts. Even the immaterial is formed and created by technology - driven by the imperative of the economic rationale.

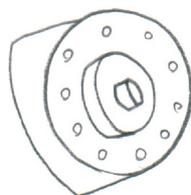
As Lev Vygotsky and Susanne Langer have pointed out, all things around us, all these technological wonders, have their first origin in someone's fantasies, dreams, hallucinations and visions. These things, which through their demand govern local and global economical processes, have little to do with what we usually regard as "basic human needs". It is rather so, it could be argued, that the economy at large is governed by human's unbounded thirst for jewellery, toys and entertainment. For some reason - the inherent urge of science for being taken seriously, maybe - these aspects have been recognised only in a very limited way within technological and economical research.

The seriousness of science is grey, Goethe said, whereas the colour of life glows green. We want to bring forward yet another colour, that of frivolity, and it is pink.

The Pink Machine Papers is our attempt to widen the perspective a bit, to give science a streak of pink. We would like to create a forum for half-finished scientific reports, of philosophical guesses and drafts. We want thus to conduct a dialogue which is based on current research and which gives us the opportunity to present our scientific ideas before we develop them into concluding and rigid - grey - reports and theses.

Finally: the name "Pink Machine" comes from an interview carried out in connection with heavy industrial constructions, where the buyer of a diesel power plant worth several hundred million dollars confessed that he would have preferred his machines to be pink.

Claes Gustafsson



also available at

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