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A Story-in-the-making: An Intertextual Exploration of a Multivoiced Narrative

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Abstract

The following study will explore the stories which are not told – that is, it will scrutinize the process of intertextual emergence of an ultimately open story: one which has neither discernible authorship nor agenda and which remains in-the-making rather than strives to achieve closure. The paper will discuss the process in which multifaceted and multidirectional organizational stories are created, in which plots and characters exchange and ‘ending’ is defied. This lack of closure is perceived here as a breeding ground for networked meanings, which, if allowed to remain interdependent and plural, eschew the danger of a new organizational story becoming universal carrier of inflexibly established contents. Since the unifying semantic organizational frameworks (e.g. ‘success story’) may be construed as impostors attempting to ascribe both authorship and agency to a non-agentical and non-authored ‘untold story’, this study proposes one way in which multi-directedness and plurality of the story may be preserved.

“And so it goes...”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Introduction

Does it make sense to talk about the untold? Given the audience to which this work is presented – most likely acquainted with Tamara-like heterogeneity of aspects of storymaking and means to ‘tell’ the story – the concept of ‘untold story’ is not going to be stunning. If Derrida is right that human beings are structural thinkers (1981), then ‘facts’ – structured and solidified processes – tell the stories as much as obfuscate them. The factual account of organizational

success story may cover more than it reveals: the way in which narrative elements are combined may deliberately discourage alternative combinations. Even in the absence of externally imposed agenda the reader may favour ‘meaningful’ readings of organizational stories by assembling them into neatly structured narratives, for instance those of success, collapse, struggle, betrayal, and other. Such readings, from definition emphasize (and deemphasize) matching elements – ‘the good employee’, ‘the bad boss’, ‘economic recession’ or ‘corrupted politicians’. Other may go unnoticed, or be deleted for the benefit of ‘the story’. The predilection to ‘tell the story’, to immobilize its elements into the final (for us) or official (if the external agency is involved) version, renders more stories silent than it gives voice to. The following study proposes that stories are most interesting and genuine before (rather than after) they are being told, urges to listen to them rather than to tell them, and suggests one way to reconcile ourselves to silences which unfold.

Theoretical framework

In the postmodern sense the untold is always there, if ‘being told’ is construed as ‘being final’. If meanings are intertextual (Kristeva, 1986a; 1986b; Barthes, 1988), infinitely deferred (Derrida, 1976) and always prone to be supplemented (Derrida, 1981), then they must not be singled out in an isolated framework of a given text. However, as long as the intention of the text’s author is taken into account some texts are more ‘final’ than others. If texts are devices conceived in order to produce their Model Readers (MR) (Eco, 1990; 1984) – the ones who cooperate with the author in actualizing the text in a specific manner and co-produce the text by filling the gaps as intended by the author (Eco, 1979) – then the author’s strategy will impact upon the degree of ‘untoldness’ in the story. For instance, within the realm of cinematic storytelling one may distinguish *explicit* stories (such as *Rambo: First Blood* [1982], *American Pie* [1999]) in which the MR is clearly a non-reflexive consumer of the scripted storyline, as well as those – *open* stories – in which the MR uses the few clues provided by the author to construct a story on his own (e.g. *Rabbits* [2002]). Between the *explicit* and *open* extremes one encounters a range of authorial strategies inviting the reader’s creativity and imagination in filling in the gaps to differing degrees. These untold spaces are *meant* to be populated by the recipient’s rationalizations, but not “*anything goes*” – for instance, some stories bear transcendental readings (when the reader introduces ‘untold elements’, such as supreme being, unmoving mover or the absolute) while other make them unlikely (Camus, Vonnegut and Kafka are among the ‘tellers’ of stories which fend off transcendentalism). In both cases the coherence of the stories is the goal – we tend to read stories in a way which makes sense to us, but also, typically, cooperate with the author (Eco, 1990). Text provides some sort of direction, and while, in the name of coherence, perceiving John Rambo as a depressed war veteran is fully warranted, reading *American Pie*’s (1999) character of Stifler as a transformative leader is not. Similarly, the story’s coherence enables us to read *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as a criminal, political satire or a transcendental horror – Frost and Lynch’s script makes these readings fully tenable.

Naturally, coherence must not be an internal feature of the given storymaking context - postmodern stories are never deemed coherent in this way. Neither is it leading to rhetorical closure where the silences were already explored and the problems ‘were solved’ (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). And yet, multiple ‘solved problems’ or ‘facts’ can still partake in creating an open, as well as coherent story. In fact, those factual micro-closures may be of particular interest to story-readers: the more discernible are the ‘facts’ in the particular rendition of the story, the stronger the signposting for the genre in question and hence an indication of openness degree enabled by the author. That those facts and closures of social reality may be perceived as processes themselves, changes very little to the way they are used, as they still provide handy orientating points. The fact-based or ‘final’ renditions of the story are no less (and no more) than riverbeds for storymaking.

If the institutional order which surrounds us may be perceived as an accomplished storyteller then threads such as power, truth and control are its favourite themes (conf. Foucault, 1975). Organizations tell stories (Czarniawska & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). However, when it comes to organizational storytelling, an author may not be easy to distinguish or stories can have a number of authors each telling their small part. An organizational story: can be built on contributions coming from different sources (1); can employ different criteria of reasoning (2); their readers can become acquainted with different parts at different times (3) [Boje, 1995]; as well as have their own agendas impacting on reading/co-constructing the story irrespective of the intention of the author(s) (4). In this case relying on coherence warranted by the notion of the Model Reader appears to be misplaced. Therefore, the following study proposes that, as an area of inquiry, organizational storytelling calls for an approach in which focusing on a multivoiced

intertextuality of ‘the backdrop for story-making’ is given precedence over attempting to retrace the plot of the evolving storyline.

Intertextuality is understood here as the relationships in which texts stand to each other and how the meaning emerges from this interrelation. The texts link to each other, borrow from each other and intertwine with each other – the resulting meaning is relational and interconnected as well as dependent on previous enactments (Allen, 2000). How the text is to be interpreted relates to its intertextuality, that is its history encompassing other texts, different readers, different authors as well as other conditions influencing the manner in which a particular text is produced (Parisier Plottel & Kurz Charney, 1978). Importantly, the author of the text is first and foremost a reader of other multiple texts, which may be reflected in explicit quotations and references (Still & Worton, 1990), but also in implicit links and innuendos. In both cases texts iterate – they ‘repeat’ certain textual fragments, either explicitly by e.g. quoting or implicitly belonging to a particular literary tradition, using clichés, etc. (Porter, 1986). The texts discussed in this paper seem to constitute a particular case of iterability – they seemingly refer to the clearly delineated situational context which they nevertheless construe in (sometimes strikingly) divergent manners. The intertextuality of these constructions appears to fulfill a crucial function – that of grounding the texts within the same ‘textual reality’ and enabling the reader to relate to the ‘topic’ of discussion.

This process of ‘relating’ can be mediated by the ‘openness’ of the text. Open work has been discussed in terms of multiplicity and plurality in art as well as the interactive process between the reader and the text itself (Eco, 1989). For Umberto Eco, the work is open by the author’s decision to leave arrangements of some constituents of a work to the public (or to chance) [ibid.]. The ‘openness’ may be ultimate (it sometimes is compared by Eco to indeterminacy in quantum physics [1989]), it is however intentional: exemplary open literary works mentioned by Eco are Kafka’s *Castle* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. While the former creates a world of ambiguity in which values and dogmas are constantly questioned, the latter deliberately seeks to offer an image of the ontological and existential situation of the contemporary world (1989).

The point of this paper is to suggest that, contrary to popular belief, some ‘open works’ may not be deliberate and that their openness and intertextuality may be perceived as the two sides of the same coin. This study will also scrutinize some strategies of imposing meanings on stories (‘creating stories’), as well as propose a way to sensitize the ‘readers’ of organizational realities to the ways in which organizational stories can be managed.

A possible objection to this strategy is that ‘undeliberately open works’ are not stories at all. In fact, it may seem fair to assume that if there is no identifiable source which attempts to ‘tell the story’, an effort to collate different ‘stories on that topic’ is not as much an analysis of a story as rather an act of its creation. And yet, do we really need to be able to identify a singular agency standing ‘behind’ the story to say that there is one? Are the ethnographers not allowed to perceive the set of concepts, mission statements, widely announced ambitions or failed undertakings as a ‘story about’ an organization? Do we not allow ourselves to get repeatedly seduced by the spurious essentiality of processes suggesting that there is something to make them unfold: a human agency, an object, a topic? Finally, is Van Mannen (1973; 1974; 1975) looking at ‘police work’ and Boje (1995) at Disneyland in their seminal studies, or are they collecting the unrelated accounts of various social phenomena? Some metastories may be approached in a similar way – for instance, in this way exactly ‘ethnography’ may be construed (Clair, 2003). Unsurprisingly, my contention is that our predilection to categorize various aspects of human experience into topics or objects (whether these ‘reallly’ are what we make of them or not) turns them into stories-for-us. Even if no *one* has told them, they have been heard.

The story evoked below would have been different, of course, if I happened to see it differently. And yet this natural contingency was strongly limited by intertextual traits, as one aspect of the story led to another; directing my attention to yet another (and yet another) teller of a story. Like in the Latour’s study on the failure of Aramis technological project, in which the multiple storymaking sources (that of bureaucratic dossier, sociological commentary, fictional dialogue, interview transcript and even the voice of Aramis itself) are being voiced at the same interpretative level (1996), the current research remains just as agnostic towards the correctness of different renditions. However, when Latour proclaims that his account is “both a little more and a little less than a story” (Latour, 1996, p. X), in my view the narrative collage presented here is a story, which appears as we speak – or rather read.

Empirically, my research is based on a story of the collapse of a higher education institution based in a Central European country. It is a story about an organization rather than one told by it – actors such as the former and the present dean of the faculty; the legal owner; the founder; the students; the newspapers; and the Ministry of Education, all recount their part of the story which for the ease of analysis – but also due to the logic of construction of the story by most actors – is divided into 3 parts: origins of the problem; the process of its unfolding; and the evil-doers. The story’s backdrop will be approached as a narrative collage – rather than a coherent plot – in order to explore the network of viewpoints,

interests, perceptions, problems and solutions the confluence of which creates a sort of ‘a story-in-the-making’. The adherence to the original collage’s method (Kostera, 2006) is not strict, as different accounts are not initiated by the researcher and stories are not intentionally fictive. But actors still speak freely, and their stories are collected by researcher without editing out ‘non-matching’ accounts. My role is to see what stories as a whole amount to (Kostera, 2006). The materials used in this study were sourced from two major national newspapers, the webpages of public institutions (such as the Ministry of Education), publicly accessible blogs as well as interviews with the main actors broadcasted in the media. The names of places and actors have been anonymized.

The story will be presented in 3 instalments and the voice will be given exclusively to actors. At the end of each part a brief analysis will be conducted with a view to recounting the story from each actor’s viewpoint. It is premeditated that no information regarding the story is given to the reader prior to immersing into the story. The reader is exposed to the story the same way the author was when the issue became public – I was never in any way engaged in (nor had I any information about) any aspect of the situational context around which the story unfolds.

The Story

Story – part 1: Defining the problem

Students:

A student described the situation which he was facing in a letter published by a local newspaper: “The first seminars are scheduled for next week, but we don’t have the session’s timetable and we don’t even know where the school will be located (sic!). I am just too scared to address the authorities since I feel they may fool me as well. And I’ve paid for the whole term upfront...” (Gazeta Wyborcza [1])

A student of another university (Y) owned by the same group of people says “The experiences with the School are full of ambiguities, misinformation, and misgivings both on the part of the School and the Ministry of Education alike” (Gazeta Wyborcza [1]). She continues with a complicated description of the recent developments including shortages of staff, cancelled seminars and lectures, lack of equipment, etc, to conclude that the School failed to address these issues and refuses to respond to students’ queries.

Students referred to the problem as early as 2.5 years before the situation became public. In their letter to the Ministry of Education they asked: “Is it normal that the library is closed a week before the exams and remains closed during the exam period? Is it normal that the tutor does not even have an MA?” (Gazeta Wyborcza [2]). They also inquired if it is a normal practice to introduce the modules which had not been accepted by the Ministry, whether they should be forced to pay for their education in cash and if it is acceptable to be left without an MA supervisor.

Newspaper:

“The School X is a non-public entity founded in mid-1990s under the auspices of institution Y, which ensured solid academic expertise from experienced and well-known members of staff. In fact, for many years the School was recognized as an excellent academic institution by academic rankings. In 2012 it occurred that the University had nearly £1 000 000 in debt (including interests) and that all its assets including students fees were taken over by the bailiff. In early 2012 the students of X received bailiff’s letter. Despite that fact in the fall of 2012 the School commenced accepting the students unaware of the situation for the new academic year. The dean denied the accusations, pledged lack of knowledge and resigned from his post.

It has also been confirmed that the University X issued BA certificates to people who had never studied there, but were enrolled at the University Z – the vice-dean of which was at the same time the president of X.

The students of this, once excellent, private school were informed that they fees would be taken over by the bailiff due to School’s poor financial condition – the debt amounts to nearly £2 000 000.

The Ministry of Education reacted to the School continuing to accept new students only following the newspaper’s debunking publication, despite being informed on numerous occasions for at least 2 years about the issues surrounding the University X. The Ministry decided to suspend the courses taught by the University X. However, the lecturers informed us that they hadn’t received any such information.

One of the two owners of the University, and its current president, is either the owner or the shareholder of another 5 private universities, including the University Y where he is also a vice-dean.” (Gazeta Wyborcza [2]). In early 2013 the School dropped to the 50th place in the national ranking [Rzeczpospolita [2]).

The founders (previous owners):

“When the University was sold to new owners, they were contractually obliged to pay the University’s debts. However, they failed to cover the debts. The founders have sued them and requested the annulment of the contract.” (Gazeta Wyborcza [5])

The academic staff (lecturers):

The lecturers complained to the Ministry on many occasions. In 2010 they stipulated that “following the drastic pay cuts during the academic year many of our most acclaimed colleagues left the University (...) At the moment there is no course leader. The School does not have the sufficient (minimum) resources to continue to exist” (Gazeta Wyborcza [3]). One of the members of the academic staff informed the authorities that several dozens of people who never studied in X received their BA diplomas. He says “they never studied here, they never passed any exam here, their supervisors were never employed by this university and their diplomas were signed by the person who was never employed here either” (Gazeta Wyborcza [4]). The latter is the new dean, who approx. 12 month later became the dean of the University X. The former employee of X points out that the University X is a sort of an educational pyramid – once it had been sold to the new owners the University assets were simply stolen: e.g. the library and IT room have vanished.

The new owners:

“The university is not in danger” says the new owner (and the president). He admits that he is related to other academic institutions, but only the University X has financial problems. According to him, the current situation is the fault of the previous owners:

“They sold the property to the developer, they took the advance payment, didn’t keep their part of the deal and had to return the advance payment which they didn’t have any more”.

Following that the University grounds were re-sold to the developer, however, the school reserved the right to use them as long as the investment doesn’t start (if it doesn’t start until the beginning of the new academic year, the school will be allowed to stay until it ends).

According to the new owner, the property is worth less than £6 000 000. It is not true that the University issued false BA certificates.

It is true that we made it possible for the students from another university (Y) to finish their course at X – the ministry put the obstacles in students’ way by discontinuing one of the courses, hence they were transferred. It happened in the full compliance with legal regulations and academic practice. However, soon after the ministry decision was declared illegal by the court! Hence we decided to apply the X’s not Y’s criteria of graduating to those students who were already transferred.

In respect of the newspaper’s accusation of forging diplomas, we declare that we will sue the newspaper for libel.

It is striking to hear accusations from the former dean and from the author of the article that the university is a money laundry – is it more ethical to have 500 students and increasing debt as it was before (when the former dean was in charge) or just several dozens of students and a stable debt level?

If we followed the irrational path indicated to us by the previous owners and the previous dean (not to cut costs and not to decrease employment) we would inevitably have led the university on the brink of bankruptcy.” (University X)

The new dean:

“All these complaints are misdirected – I had nothing to do with the fact that the building itself if not properly secured, that there is no cloakroom... These things are just not my problem”.

However, when asked about the lack of programme and module leaders, lack of research seminars, specialist publications, overburdened academic staff, not summoning the School’s senate meetings and not responding to the Ministry’s queries the new dean’s response was silence. (Gazeta Wyborcza [4])

The Ministry of Education:

Following the Ministry’s inquiry in the University X the recruitment for the new academic year was suspended – the new educational cycle will not be started. The existing students were offered the Ministry’s assistance in transferring to another school, should they wish to do so. The vice-minister announced another round of controls in order to determine the actual staffing level. She adds: “I fear the worst – I fear that these people are not there anymore. (In that case)... the only thing we could do would be to either suspend or discontinue the course.” (Ministry of Education)

Analysis – defining the problem

From the students’ (of University X) viewpoint the problem consists in the lack of basic information regarding their course, as well as certain clues – such as closing the library, lack of properly trained academic staff, not having an MA supervisor and having to pay in cash - which they decode as warnings that their conditions of studying deteriorate. There are other strong plots which interweave with their narrative apparently sustaining it – such as a student of Y describing her story suggesting that a relationship between the two exists.

The newspaper’s rendition of the problem contrasts the glorious past of the institution with its miserable (and deteriorating) condition under the new management. In fact, the newspaper’s account largely ignores the events which took place prior to overtaking the University by the new owner, and focuses on the latter’s negative role in the story – accruing debt, neglecting students, breaking the law and/or academic customs, ignoring the supervisory body. The newspaper also brings into equation the fact that the new owner is involved with many similar academic institutions – the fact which is not explicitly evaluated but which seems to play the role of additional clue, to be decoded as a warning.

From the viewpoint of the previous owners the problem is that the new owners broke the clause of the acquisition contract stipulating that they are legally obliged to pay all debts. The founders’ response is to sue the new owners.

The academic staff of X perceives the problem as twofold: the lack of resources needed to continue the operations of the university (library, staff, etc.), and the unethical behaviour of the new owner (e.g. issuing of forged diplomas). It seems that from the staff’s viewpoint the problem didn’t exist prior to the ownership change.

For the new owners the problem is clearly related to the actions of the former management team: the irresponsible manner of dealing with financial matters and, it appears lack of management skills. The problem is the debt which appeared prior to their overtaking the institution, hence the new management had nothing to do with worsening of the X’s condition.

The new dean’s narrative shows his rather convoluted approach to the problem, however, when it comes to the educational side of the issue (for which he takes responsibility), he does not see any problem at all. He suggests that there were certain organizational issues; however, they were not of his making. When faced with direct accusation that it was within his own area that the problem appeared, he chooses to remain silent, possibly hinting that he is not entitled to discuss such matters.

The Ministry suggests that the problem is both with the quality of education and with the quality of management in X and that it is a relatively new issue (occurring after the acquisition took place). However, it does not provide any clear indication of why it construes the problem to be serious and what it actually thinks the problem is (apart from the vague assumption that staff shortage may be very severe in X).

Story – part 2: Who are the evil doers?

The Ministry of Education:

The Ministry admitted that it made a mistake and that the course should have been declared inactive a year ago – it hadn't been and the recruitment for the new academic year was undertaken. "Upon the conclusion of the audit carried out at the University X and on the basis of the very alarming signals from the students, we have decided to implement definitive measures against this institution." They added that they had never witnessed malevolence of such magnitude in any other university they ever dealt with. The Ministry's spokesperson admitted that the Ministry should have audited the University immediately after being informed about the severe staff shortages.

"Never before the owners of the university used the law so ruthlessly and so effectively making it impossible for us to react" – says the vice-minister." (Gazeta Wyborcza [5])

The new owners:

The new owners construe the whole situation as a witch-hunt and as a mistake. They say that the negative Ministry's decision is based on the outdated law and that the new law guarantees the university's existence and that once it is recognized all the problems will disappear.

One of the owners says:

"(...) The former Dean who is currently accusing for 'trying to destroy the university' has clearly forgotten about some of the things he have done. For instance, he was not fit at all to fulfil the role of the Dean and the University had to let him go. In this respect we agree with him that the Ministry 'failed to oversee the situation' because he shouldn't have been entitled to fulfil the Dean's role in the first place.

It is incorrect to suggest that the new dean was a puppet hired to sign the student's exam books. He was responsible for the didactic process and not financial or organizational matters and there is nothing surprising about it.

The vice-minister's statements are preposterous (...). In fact, the perspective should be reversed – it is us and the number of other academic institutions who is missing the regulations to discipline the public bodies, such as the Ministry. The Ministry's decisions are continuously overruled by the courts, the students are confused and misinformed and all that the Ministry has to say is that they made a mistake because the law is complicated. It is surprising to see the vice minister accusing us that we know how to apply the law (...) In fact the Ministry's actions border on harassment.

Regarding the unlawful admission of the new students and breaking the law while teaching them: all these accusations are based on false premises. The law states clearly that the university loses the right to admit new students when the decision is handed to it from the Ministry. Hence we not only have right to accept new students until such decision is handed in to us, but also to keep the existing students after the decision preventing new admissions is handed in!" (University X)

The former dean:

He states:

"A few years ago there were several hundreds of students in X, now there are several dozens left. It is no surprise. I think that the owners are just trying to take over the University's capital and to destroy the University itself. The state is also responsible for this: it should have controlled what is happening on a regular basis and carefully check if all necessary conditions are fulfilled. (...) I am horrified to learn about the actions of the new management and I declare that I have nothing to do with it whatsoever. (...) I'm very disappointed with actions of the Ministry – they knew very well that bad things are happening and that students are suffering as a result." (Gazeta Wyborcza [2])

The newspaper:

The newspaper's headline: *The ministry does not react*

“The students, lecturers, former employees and founders of the University X were right – if the Ministry had not been slacking the current problems would have been avoided. (...) The National Accreditation Committee (NAC) didn't control the University until two years after the first complaints had appeared. However, even after the control was conducted no decisions were made by the Ministry. (...) The Ministry took 4 months to reach conclusions regarding the results of the control, which was after the students paid their fees and after the high school graduates paid for the entry exams. In the case of X it apparently wasn't enough for the Ministry to be informed about the forging of the BA certificates, about the respectable academics leaving en masse, having serious financial problems, and not having the minimum staffing level.”

Another headline: *No one was in a hurry to find out what is going on: neither the ministry nor the dean.* (Gazeta Wyborcza [6])

The new dean:

To be honest there are certain things about this university which I'm rather ashamed of. I'm ashamed that my name is included among such deplorable facts.

Apparently, the company which owns the university is going to disappear and the debt will disappear with it [the media's commentary calls it a 'reckless comment' – M.I.]. This (X) is a private entity, and most educational institutions of that kind belong to different companies, and these companies are profit-oriented. These companies are represented by the president and it was no different in the case of X. The president hires people to perform different duties – for instance, I was hired as a dean and my function was to sign the student records book, do the exams, create the course program, etc. The division of tasks was very clear: the president was dealing with all the management, business-related and personal issues, and I was merely responsible for student records books and exams.

[Question from the media – We have heard that the BA diplomas were given to the students who never studied at X]

I've never signed such diplomas.

[Q: – I have these diplomas right in front of me with your signature on them. There is also a signature of the person who never worked at X. Why did you sign these diplomas?]

I've never heard of that – people who were not students received the diplomas? I don't know anything about it.

[Q: – we've heard that it were the students of University Y – the one belonging to the owner of X – who were supposed to pass five exams before they could receive the diploma. They never passed them.]

I know nothing about it. The new owner owns or co-owns six different schools. If one course is discontinued at one of them he is obliged to enable the students to complete it somewhere else. And if the additional exams are passed and the procedures are obeyed I don't see any problem.

[Q: – But at this very moment I am looking at the document which was sent from the ministry and addressed to you, and this letter stipulates multiple problems [the ones described above – M.I.]. The response came from you. Now, if you're saying that you knew nothing about these problems, who opened the letter and wrote the response in your stead?]

I don't remember such a letter. When I started working here many things were already going in the wrong direction. Most issues were not explained to me back then, and you have to appreciate how huge this mechanism really is.

[Q: – But, professor, what were you actually doing all that time?]

Possibly I should have insisted more that the owner does the right thing... I might be guilty as well... I believed in his [President's – M.I.] willingness to make things right. I thought he knew his job and I trusted him (...). It is difficult to question the actions of the owner. (Gazeta Wyborcza [3])

The lecturers:

The senate of X prepared a special regulation enabling student transfer between X and Y, but the new owner and the new dean rejected this regulation without consulting the senate and decided to issue the diplomas (of X to the students of Y) without complying with the universities' regulations. (Gazeta Wyborcza [1])

Analysis – Who are the evil-doers?

It may be inferred that in the Ministry's view the blame should be distributed four-fold, however, not evenly:

1. Most of the blame is attributed to the new owners whose actions are perceived as malevolent and intentional – they actively obstruct the educational process.
2. The Ministry itself is to blame as well to some extent, since it hadn't reacted on time.
3. The students are guilty of imprudence since they didn't double check the actual conditions of studying at X.
4. Finally, the law is the culprit since it is not adjusted to deal with situations such as that one.

The new owner's account suggests that the current barrage of accusations can be perceived in terms of a witch-hunt or a mistake. There are four distinctive culprits here:

1. The previous owners who put the university in a difficult situation by making arrangements which they could not keep. The fines accrued as a result of their negligence present an obstacle to the successful resolution of the current debacle.
2. The Ministry neither wants to know nor knows how to execute the law it is supposed to uphold. As a result it exacerbates the problem it was supposed to solve.
3. The previous dean should be treated as a criminal since his actions were illegal, and he is not entitled to offer the advice on how to solve the problem.
4. The newspaper articles are either based on lies or misconceptions and the author will be sued.

The other actors, namely the new dean and the students, are perceived as neutral and likely to be manipulated by the four evil-doers (above). The new owners are free of any guilt and in fact they are the saviours acting against the conspiracy of the malevolent actors (as well as for the benefit of the students).

According to the former dean, the new owners are guilty of intentional manipulation: their agenda includes stealing the money and destroying the university. The Ministry is also to be blamed for slacking and not fulfilling its controlling duties.

The newspaper is very explicit in ascribing guilt to the Ministry: it points out its slacking, and the chaotic manner in which it reacted when the problem appeared. Similarly, the newspaper explicitly criticizes the new dean for his manipulations, and most of all for his ambiguous reaction to the issues pointed out by the public. However, undoubtedly the main identified culprit is the new owner – the sheer amount of space devoted to describing his actions may be an indication. On the other hand the manner of ascribing guilt is rather suggestive than explicit: the newspaper underlines that the certificates might have been forged and that the ownership of six educational institutions may be suspicious in itself, as well as quotes other protagonists saying that the new owner is responsible for the debt – and yet appears quite reserved when it comes to definitive statements.

The story from the viewpoint of the new dean does not seem to involve any culprits since the problem does not really exist. At times he mentions that he feels ashamed by being associated with the whole case, but what the case itself is (in his perspective) rather unclear.

At times he seems to suggest that the new owner is to take the blame but soon after he emphasizes that such division of responsibilities (organizational from educational) is a common practice.

From the lecturers' perspective the guilt for issuing forged BA certificates and for the lack of resources seems to be distributed evenly between the new dean and the new owner since their actions were equally non-compliant with the university's regulations.

Story – part 3: The process

Students:

“The seminars are due to start next week and we still don't have the timetable, something is clearly wrong, but no one would give us a clear answer.”

One of the students is shocked after receiving the bailiff's letter:

“We were told that our school will be transferred and merged with another school. We just don't know what is going to happen to us. We would like to be transferred to Z [located 100 miles away from the current location – M.I.], because we would have better conditions to continue our studies there.” (Gazeta Wyborcza [5])

The new owner:

“It is true that some students receive the bailiff's letter informing them that their fees are taken over by creditors. However, this move in no way means that the University is in danger of bankruptcy. The bailiff is obliged by law to execute the debt; this debt however originates from before the university was taken over by us. It occurred that by the time of this acquisition the University X was already on the brink of collapse. Despite that fact the current management continues to run the university, and, importantly, the debt has not increased ever since (apart from the accrued interests). The debt is the result of the previous owners' ostentatious actions and in fact their lack of management skills. These debts were partly hidden from us. Suffice it to say that the previous owners informed us that the debt amounts to £320 000 while in fact it amounted to £650 000 plus interests.” (University X)

The new dean:

The new dean has resigned. He says:

“The School has £900 000 in debt. I stepped down because I wasn't informed about anything. I came to the conclusion that I don't want to have my name associated with a dubious business such as that one. I found out about the financial problems of this institution from the students. (...)

I was just a hired hand, and I wasn't informed about anything. (...) I was only signing the letters sent to the Ministry.

[Question from the media: - Did you read them before signing?]

Yes, I did.

[Q: – And did you read the letters from the Ministry?]

Yes.

[Q:– So you must have realized that the lecturers were not paid on time?]

Yes, and there is nothing surprising about that, I've discussed this issue with the senate many times. By the way, my payments were also delayed by many months.

[Q: – And you knew that the library was closed, that books disappeared, and that the canteen disappeared as well just as the computers did?]

The library was already closed when I got hired. I wanted to endow the library with my own private books only to learn that the library does not exist. The new owner said that the students will use the library in the university Y. And that is what I replied in my letter to the Ministry.

[Q: Did you receive students' complaints?]

Some of them: Yes.

[Q: And what did you do?]

I remember one student writing to me about some signature in the student record book... Whenever I was capable I was always trying to make a favourable decision as far as the student affairs are concerned. But because the president was responsible for so many areas, many decisions were passed over to him.

[Q: how often were you coming to work?]

Once or twice a week. Initially, I was there almost every day, but then I realized there was nothing for me to do there – my decision making power was very limited. (Gazeta Wyborcza [4])

The media:

“Both the Ministry and the new owner were slow to react – as exemplified by one of the student's complaints: The Ministry replied in mid-March that it would investigate the issue and on the same day the letter was sent to the new owner of X. There was no reply, so the Ministry re-sent the letter in May and again in October and in February of the next year. It simply kept asking the same question it asked a year ago.

The Ministry received at least 11 complaints against the new owners of X. However, it didn't react until after it became clear that the student fees will be taken over by the bailiff. Only then did it decide to withdraw the X's licence and started considering its compulsory liquidation.” (Gazeta Wyborcza [2])

The Ministry:

The Ministry informed that the standards and quality of teaching are overseen by the National Accreditation Committee and that the student's complaints had been handed over to NAC.

“We have addressed the University, its founder and its current manager with inquiries and recommendations. We received some replies, but none of them provided reliable information. We have commenced the process of withdrawing the licence for performing academic functions which may result in the liquidation of X. It is because the interests of the students and other third parties must be secured. We want to make it possible for them to finish their course.” (The Ministry of Education).

The NAC gave University a negative recommendation (Rzeczpospolita [1]).

Analysis – the process

The process from the students' viewpoint is quite ambiguous and the only constant elements in it are lack of information regarding the basic aspects of the university's operation (e.g. location of the seminars) and the fact that most of them received the letter from the bailiff calling them to pay their fees directly to his account. They are aware of various rumours surrounding this situation, such as the possible merger with another university and the resulting permanent change of location, but they didn't manage to confirm them.

For the new owner, the process involved the engagement from the four previously indicated parties all of whom contributed to the University's problems in one way or another. The former management accrued debt and failed to pay, the Ministry neither prevented this from happening nor attempted to solve the situation (quite the opposite – each Ministry's action is perceived as malevolent or at least mismanaged), the former dean contributed with his own bad will to exacerbating the University's condition and the final burden was put on the University's (and in fact the new owner's) shoulders by the media coverage, which is said to be full of lies and confusion. Interestingly, the estimate of the amount of debt is quite different according to the new owners and to the newspaper.

The new dean is of the opinion that one important issue in the whole process was that he was not involved in it to any significant extent. However, he does not perceive this lack of involvement to be his fault – various parties (possibly including the new owner) are responsible for it. However, he remains calm about most of the aspects of X's functioning which appeared alarming for other parties: closing of the library, interrogative letters from the Ministry, students' complaints, lack of space or resources to do one's work, even the threat of liquidation of the University are not seen as serious problems to be worried about. They were either rendered blown out of proportion by the other parties involved or are perceived as fitting within the industry norms.

The same circumstances are construed by the newspaper as 'shocking': the taking over of student's fees, the huge number of students' complaints, very probable forging of BA certificates, as well as the unprofessional manner in which the new dean was carrying out his duties – all of these are emphasized in an alarming pitch by the media. The Ministry had its own explicitly negative role to play in this process: its actions are perceived as a smoke screen behind which the irregularities were taking place. Importantly, from the newspaper's perspective the whole problem didn't start until after the takeover.

From the Ministry's viewpoint the single culprit – clearly the new owner – is responsible for the ongoing irregularities and unlawful acts in the process of the University's collapse. The malevolence and reckless, unethical using of the law to one's benefit on the part of the new owner made the Ministry undertake a series of tough decisions including the likely future ruling according to which the existence of the University may be discontinued. It is important to note that in the Ministry's rendition of the story its responsibility for the process is shared with another body (NAC). Whichever way the situation will be resolved, the students are ultimately responsible for their own fate.

The University's internet webpage informs that it is 'under construction'. The author could find no information about the owners, about the management, organizational structure or the programme. The only explicit information on the webpage refers to the student fees: approximately £900 for one term, £80 for the entry exam.

Discussion

Naturally, it is possible to distill the linear timeline of the evolution of the story. Taking the bits and pieces of information scattered around the stories told by the different actors, one could propose that the timeline is in fact relatively straightforward:

The linear rendition:

1. The School was created in 1990s by a respectable public body. The University is well staffed and hosts over 500 students.
2. Around 2008 the arrangements are made between the owners and the developer giving the latter ownership to the part of the University grounds. The owners accept an advance payment.
3. The owners decide to withdraw from the deal, however, they do not return the advance payment, which starts to accrue interests.
4. The owners decide to sell the University to the new owners obliging them to fully pay the University's debt.

5. The new owners do not fulfil their part of the deal, the financial situation deteriorates and in early 2010 the dean resigns. The owners hire a new dean who is not given any significant role in the process. He basically provides an umbrella for the illegal operations of the owners.
6. The students are concerned about the deteriorating conditions of studying (staff shortages, closing of the library, etc.) and they contact the Ministry of Education.
7. The Ministry attempts to contact the new dean and the new owner. None of them replies for a prolonged period of time. The Ministry does not take further action. The new owner continues to use the University's assets for the benefit of his other educational enterprises.
8. The Ministry conducts an audit; however, its results are not publicly communicated.
9. The students receive a letter from the bailiff informing them that their fees will be taken over. Most of them leave; the remaining ones are shocked and contact the press.
10. The media contact all interested parties. Once the issue becomes public the Ministry decides to withdraw the university's licence (allegedly on the basis of the previous control). The new dean resigns.
11. The owner promises to merge the university with another one in his business portfolio. Most students accept this solution.

However, it is important to decide in what relationship does the linear timeline stand to the set of stories which are being told. It appears that each single point in this developing story would be either missing or explicitly rejected from at least one of the actor's perspectives. For instance, the story didn't start this way (1) according to the new owner, it did not quite evolve the way that (2) is suggesting according to the previous owners, the first perturbing twist (3) was certainly not such according to the founders, and, even though it would seem underpinned by the undeniable facts, stage (8) hasn't been construed as such by the Ministry (its account holds that the process of analysis was under way so it wouldn't make sense to accuse them of 'not communicating the results'). It appears that attempting to force the story into a one-dimensional and linear framework does not so much explain what these different stories 'really are about' as rather creates one more story – that of the (perhaps neutral) reader with the predilection for linearity. The latter story does not seem to reveal anything particularly important: it makes for an exercise in arbitrary selection of cues underpinned by linear and rationalist assumptions rather than involved and emotional pattern of sensemaking.

However, in order to avoid introducing yet another story into the set of existing versions one could attempt to portray the story as a matrix of its focal aspects (perceptions of the problem, ascriptions of guilt, renditions of the process) matched with the identified actors¹. The simplified story matrix is presented below:

The story matrix

	The new owners	The Ministry	The students	The new dean	The newspaper	The lecturers	The former dean and the founders
Problem	Clearly related to the actions of the former management team: the irresponsible manner of dealing with financial matters and, it appears lack of management skills.	Unclear: possibly, the problem is both with the quality of education and with the quality of management in X. The problem is relatively new.	The lack of basic information. We know that someone is doing a bad job.	There is no problem.	Glorious past of the institution coupled with its present miserable condition under the new management: accruing debt, neglecting students, breaking the law and/or academic customs, ignoring the supervisory body. However, none of this is said explicitly.	The lack of resources needed to continue the operations of the University (library, staff, etc.) as well as the unethical behaviour of the new owner (e.g. issuing of forged diplomas).	The new owners broke the clause of the acquisition contract stipulating that they are legally obliged to pay all debts.
Who is responsible (the evil-doers)?	-The previous owners -The Ministry -The former dean -The media.	The new owner is the main culprit. The students, the Ministry and the legal framework are also to be blamed to some extent.	It is difficult to say, but someone, somewhere is doing a bad job.	No culprits (since there is no problem.	Implicitly – the new owner. Explicitly – the Ministry and the new dean.	The new dean and the new owner.	The new owners are guilty of intentional manipulation. The Ministry is also to be blamed for slacking and not fulfilling its controlling duties.
The process	The former management accrued debt; the Ministry neither prevented this nor attempted to solve the situation; the former dean contributed with his own bad will and the media coverage is full of lies and confusion.	The new owner is responsible for the ongoing irregularities and unlawful acts in the process of the University's collapse.	Ambiguous: the only constant elements are lack of information regarding the basic aspects of the University's operation and the fact that we received the letter from the bailiff's office.	I wasn't informed about anything (and I do not exclude the possibility that someone else was doing a bad job).	The taking over of students' fees, the huge number of students' complaints, very probable forging of the BA certificates as well as the unprofessional manner in which the new dean was carrying out his duties – all these circumstances are 'shocking'.	The new owners stole the money and forged the BA certificates (the new dean helped them do it).	The new owners didn't fulfil the conditions of the agreement and as a result broke the law. They are said to steal money and forge BA certificates (the rumour has it that the new dean helps them do it).

Compared to the linear rendition, the story matrix approach appears to have an important advantage, since it contributes to the emergence of a less simplistic, more liberal and certainly richer picture. It also shows why the story cannot be told linearly as one story – the continuity between different versions simply does not exist. However, I would like to posit that the price we pay for trying to do justice to multiple aspects of the story is high: one is compelled to admit that in a very important sense such story cannot be told. It should not be told, but it could be read. Naturally, such statement needs an explanation.

Even the most open of all open works (Eco evokes *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* in that respect [1989]) results from the application of the authorial strategy of some sort. Author's agenda may be as general, self-reflective and ultimately open to the reader's cooperation as presenting the psychological process of (co)creation of the story itself – James Joyce subscribes to this strategy – but even in that case the Model Reader exists: it can be (in Joyce's case it seems it *is*) everyone, but it is not no one. As mentioned in the beginning most 'texts' be it literary or cinematic works will be less open than that; the range of strategies expected from the Model Reader would not be infinite and in some cases appears indeed rather narrow. However, in each of these cases authorship is derived from the agency – the text is created on purpose (even if this purpose were autotelic – the creation itself). The multi-authorial and multidirectional narratives presented in this paper do not aspire to purposeful creation. The only sense in which 'a work' or 'a text' can be evoked in this respect is through the narratives' intertextuality: the texts revolve around similar notions; borrow them from each other; comment on, to some extent, similar situations; and identify more or less similar sets of actors – in that sense, and that sense only can we treat 'a-story-in-the-making' as a story. This study posits that the strong intertextuality enables to perceive the academic collapse story matrix as an open work of a particular kind – it has no author but it has the centre of gravity (or rather at least three such centres linked to 'the topic' as the matrix suggests) around which the narratives evolve. While it is devoid of any discernible authorial agency which would dictate the conditions to the Model Reader, while it is also devoid of the Model Reader itself, it is not devoid of the network in which different texts produced at different times by different authors end up as a meaningful interaction from which sense can be distilled. Hence, it provides 'the reader' with the backdrop for storymaking to construct his/her own rendition.

However, one must admit that if as a result a story appears, this story is not told. An attempt to 'tell' this story in one way or another would mean a recourse to a certain authorial strategy, certain assumption regarding the Model Reader and would result in yet another narrative – such as the linear rendition described above – but certainly not in "*a story of...*".

A-story-in-the-making is a multivoiced matrix of narratives mediated by intertextuality - a sort of an ultimately open and untold story. The danger of confusing it with 'the story itself' ("*a story of...*"), is particularly serious and imminent in increasingly complicated, liquidified and globalized life of modern organizations. Organizational 'realities' rarely constitute feeding ground for open works. The most typical organizational response seems to be the provision of 'final' rendition for the evolving set of stories (or a wider spectrum of such renditions destined for different audiences which results in further simplifications and even more 'new stories'), in other words: a closure. The organizational repertoire of creating new plots and stories imposing themselves as proper readings of the complicated organizational reality may include 'conquering the new market' story, 'the last survivor' story, 'the success demands sacrifices' story, and many others. The above study argues that such unifying renditions are tantamount to elevating the new intertextually-related story (e.g. created by the new management following a merger or crisis) to overarching mega-story explaining the 'real' meaning of all the stories in the matrix.

Such attempts to achieve closure (whether we think that closures may or may not 'really' be achieved) are irrevocably associated with particular distributions of organizational power and knowledge within the story-making centres, e.g. related to position in the hierarchy (Sims, 2003). These closures may be tentative only, as closure may be perceived as a process rather than the end result, nevertheless dynamics by which they are driven can be traced. 'Reading' them critically may be enlightening as regards the objects of manipulation and the dynamics of the management process, but less informative to those who pursue the interpretivist call to increased understanding of the context in which stories appear. On its own each particular story feeding into the storytelling matrix (the New Dean's, the Newspaper's, the New Owner's) can be managed just as much as the unifying rendition ("the story of..."), but the storytelling matrix itself provides a way to capture the stories in their 'natural' habitat, where they are born. Devoid of authorial strategy (bearing in mind the caveat), the 'openness' of storytelling matrix is mediated only by intertextuality, nothing else. That enables us, the readers of organizational realities, to approach organizational stories as close as it gets and make them our stories.

Conclusion

The contribution of the paper is to indicate one possible way to enable the story-in-the-making, the one that is rich and never fully 'told', defy such closure and remain what it is – a set of narratives mediated by intertextuality with no overarching agenda and no distinctive authorship. The path leads through identifying the actors and plots being discussed as well as the strategies of achieving closure in any given narrative (potentially: the upper management's, the shop floor employees', the trade unions') and remaining sensitive towards unifying and silencing attempts to 'tell the story'. Even if - or rather precisely because - they may be construed non-sensical, illogical and confusing, some organizational stories-in-the-making should be allowed to remain untold.

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ⁱ Naturally, and inevitably, both choices are to some extent arbitrary – focusing on three categories and seven actors is dictated by the facility of access to materials, which is nevertheless derived from the degree to which these actors and not others are present in the public discourse.