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Facing Inwards and Outwards at Once: The liminal temporalities of academic perfomativity

Tom Keenoy

ABSTRACT. Through metaphor (as ever), we explore some aspects of the mutually implicated *con-text, ideo-text, ego-text* and *sub-text* to be found in the contemporary UK academic lifeworld. To this end, carefully selected data from a qualitative study of the changing nature of academic work in Britain is analysed to speculate about how a discourse of performativity ('the RAE') has been 'translated' into what appear to be 'normalized' legitimate forms of organizing and social action. By illustrating how these forms are reflected in academics' liminal 'work talk', it emerges that one possible effect of this holographic process is a spatio-temporal constriction of the academic 'lifeworld'. KEY WORDS • academic work • audit culture • discourse analysis • holograms • organizing artefacts • temporal rhythms

Words are the oblique mirrors which hold your thoughts. You gaze into these word mirrors and catch glimpses of meaning, belonging and shelter . . .
Words are like the god Janus, they face outwards and inwards at once.

(O'Donohue, 1997)

Some Linear Preliminaries

Since the 1980s, successive British governments have sought to improve public sector performance through various initiatives known collectively as the 'new public management'. These policies have had a cumulative, extensive and

widely acknowledged impact on (re-)organizing and (re-)prioritizing the daily routines within what is now heralded as a revivified, 'modernizing' public sector. Constructed through a discursive mix of metaphors which privilege such artefacts as 'quality', 'customer care', 'value for money', 'public account-ability' and 'private–public partnerships', virtually all the changes have involved some degree of performance measurement accompanied by control rituals and routines such as performance targets and indicators, 'best practice' models and varieties of 'league tables'. These are projected as putative indica-tors of organizational, individual and – it often appears – infinite 'progress'. Collectively, these developments may be seen to represent the extent to which, through discourse, social action has both constructed and been constructed by the 'audit society' (Ferlie et al., 1996; Power, 1997, 2001; Reed, 2002).

For university academic employees, the most visible enactments of this 'audit culture' are two mechanisms which routinely survey and monitor their per-formance as teachers and researchers. First, there is what is usually referred to as 'the QAA' (the Quality Assessment Audit) which, despite well-intentioned ambition, merely ensures that all the bureaucratic accoutrements of an allegedly effective 'quality control process' are in place to 'measure' teaching perform-ance (Morley, 2003). Second, alongside this sits 'the RAE' (the Research Assessment Exercise) which affects to measure institutional, departmental and individual research performance. Periodically, for public consumption, it dis-plays the socially constructed 'research performance' of all those UK university departments which choose to participate in the competition for research fund-ing. This artefact has come to dominate research-oriented universities and, although its efficacy is widely contested, its impact is undoubted.

It is more complex than this but – for most academics – the RAE means they have to publish four pieces of work every five years. Departmental research performance is rated on a seven-point scale[1] and, for all higher-rated depart-ments, the financial consequences of a higher or lower rating can be very significant indeed. The research does not 'target' these audit criteria as such but does target allegedly 'high-performing' academics. These individuals are all employed in top-rated departments and – although this is a dubious and con-tentious attribution – they are among those who may be regarded as having 'benefited' from the introduction of the performativity regime. Around 30 individual academics in management departments were asked a series of very general questions about what their work is, how they do it and about how their work has changed since they joined the profession. Unsurprisingly, the RAE emerged as a central point of discussion in relation to what been happening to 'academic work'. Inevitably, the study is partial; an alternative sample would undoubtedly have produced quite different 'results'; and it would be misleading to suggest that the findings are in any sense 'generalizable'. I advance no claim other than to be representative of my own account of the data – this may or may

not resonate with the reader's (re-)reading. There is always another intertext (Keenoy and Oswick, 2004).

The initial conventional and 'public' research objective was the suitably vague ambition to explore the changing nature of academic work in the UK. In the academic community there was much heady negative talk about how the new performance measures were putting academics under pressure, down-grading teaching as a valued activity and forcing people to churn out articles for the sake of it. As one informant wryly observed:

  'Points mean prizes'.

The changes were said to be making 'work' less enjoyable, everyone was less collegial and, at least for some, it means the beginning of the end of the (life)world. In public, few academics have had anything positive to say about these new 'linguistic regimes' (Cameron, 2000), their associated institutional practices and the behaviours which they have promoted. Alternatively, such talk can be seen as embodying all the uncertainties and anxieties one might expect to hear whenever management introduces a change initiative. That said, it is also important to acknowledge that this expressed antipathy for the 'new' ideo-culture has persisted for over 15 years:[2] while many undoubtedly comply with its demands, the RAE remains a distasteful if not an alien discourse. Some have argued that the ever-extending tentacles of 'audit' mediate socially transforma-tive modes of organizing (Power, 1997, 2001; Strathern, 2000) and there is a growing literature which certainly appears to vindicate this as well as the per-sistent *public* reservations expressed by academics (Parker and Jary, 1995; Willmott, 1995; Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996; Harley, 1997, 2000, 2002; Prichard and Willmott 1997; Deem, 1998; Exworthy and Halford, 1998; Trowler, 1998, 2001; Shore and Wright, 2000; Strathern, 2000; Alexiadou, 2001; Barry, Chandler and Clark, 2001; Reed, 2002).

Reflecting my growing interest in the temporal aspects of organizing, the initial conceptual-theoretic thinking was that these new audit measures could be seen as ways of closing down the spatial and temporal autonomy long asso-ciated with the university lifeworld. Our presumed 'academic freedoms' were being squeezed and, hence, there was a particular concern to find out what was happening to the spatio-temporal rhythms of academic work. In short, there was an expectation of being able to produce – and that word is used deliberately – evidence to support the idea that the changes had created less space to 'play' and less time to do anything other than 'perform' to the tune of the new measures. Life indeed would have come to an end.

In the account which follows, the conceptual-theoretic assumptions inform-ing the analysis are grounded in social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 2000, 2001; Hacking, 2000) and sense making (Weick, 1995) and allude to the insights of actor–network theory (Law, 1986; Latour, 1987;

Law and Hassard, 1999). Methodologically, the concern is to make sense of the discursive construction(s) employed by academics to make sense of the new 'cultural' expectations with which they are now confronted. For present purposes, this involves elaborating a complex of mutually implicated metaphorical artefacts: the con-texts, ideo-texts, ego-texts and sub-texts. These will be deployed to account for the semiotic expressions which now frame the work experience of academic employees. However, while the analytic focus is on various processes of 'reality construction' (Potter, 1996), the structural-cultural conditions of 'text production' (Fairclough, 1995, 2003) are also acknowledged (if not meticulously elaborated).

Con-text

The 'con-text'[3] refers to the government-initiated new managerialist macro-scripts introduced to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of universities. As noted earlier, for production workers – my academics – the most visible and potent discursive artefacts to emerge from these scripts are the QAA and the RAE. Simultaneously, for their employers – the leading universities – an untranslatable attribute, 'RAEable', has emerged as the euphemism for the desired research outputs necessary to ensure a 'top rating' in the instrumental scrum. At the level of managerial policy, the legitimacy of the RAE as a mechanism is barely contested. As one senior academic observed:

   'Yes, it's [the RAE] now part of the wallpaper'.

All 'top' universities have such wallpaper emblazoned on their websites. The question arises, how has this decoration been discursively constructed and institutionalized?

   The first significant RAE text arrived on the desks of university vice-chancellors in 1989. Most of the production workers employed at the time barely noticed and carried on doing what they had always done – privileging teaching or research according to taste, attending the occasional conference and, if ambition bit, 'waiting' to get promoted (at that time, an academic labour market was barely visible). But their 'time serving' was regarded as an intrinsically productive activity: in iconic terms, it permitted the development of administrative skills through experience, facilitated the organizational space to specialize in allegedly thoughtful and creative teaching, and, similarly, offered time for detailed if occasionally leisurely scholarship of a chosen research field. That deeply simplistic deception, 'the quantity of visible performance', was not an issue (see also Becher, 1989).

   Initially, the event had no discernable impact on daily routines. But, 12 years on, when I started this research, the linguistic regime of the RAE had come to

dominate the way in which my informants – including those who had continued to resist its blandishments – accounted for their work activity. Somehow, an unknown and culturally deeply alien text had transmuted into an authoritative organizational script. Undoubtedly, this seminal text gently introduced academic *managers* (Reed, 2002) into the instrumental balm of performativity and the acceptance of institutional rewards for individual performance. Of course, inter-university competition over scarce resources was nothing new, but this document was among the first significant policy indicators that such competition was about to be culturally and publicly endorsed not only as the legitimate criterion of allocation but also as a justification for what some would come to see as an unspoken discrimination between 'old' and 'new' universities (in which the 'old' continued to be more equal than the 'new'). In short, to echo my informant, this document was 'the writing on the wall' and it became the organizing con-text of university managerial decision making. But it was not alone.

It is critical to note that this singular script is merely one actor nested within a much more extensive range of government-driven new managerialist policy scripts which, since 1989, have come to inhabit every corner of university managerial policy and practice. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the government actor which 'regulates' higher education in England (there are similar bodies for Wales and Scotland), proffers a continuous stream of ever-elaborating 'advice' on governance, costing and pricing, estate management, fraud prevention, franchising, investment decisions, legal services, performance indicators, procurement and purchasing, HRM, risk management, ensuring 'value for money' and, inevitably, strategic planning (for the Kafkaesque bureaucratic ambition of such services, see HEFCE (2004)). However, HEFCE's most panoptic 'service' is an intrusive periodic audit conducted at least once every five years which scrutinizes almost every aspect of university managerial policy, procedures and performance.

Of course, universities are 'autonomous' and many enjoy centuries-old charters guaranteeing them freedom from state interference. But it would be jejune to suggest that university managers are in any way deceived by the smoke and mirrors of such 'government advice'. With respect to the discursive and material processes which have facilitated new managerialist values becoming embedded in the lifeworld, what appears significant is the tone and temper of how such 'services' are projected. All are framed within the values of management accountancy with a primary emphasis on cost-effective service delivery combined with continual internal monitoring of performance; and there is no mistaking the priority accorded to Weber's categorical imperative in the five-year audit script (see Box 1 for details). On occasion, the categorical temper is muted by a nod in the direction of face-saving ambiguity. For example, while 'no meaningful league table could *fairly* demonstrate the

BOX 1
The categorical imperative

HEFCE Audit Service

Scope and approach of review

This note is to assist in preparation for an HEFCE Audit Service institutional review visit. It is an indicative outline rather than an exhaustive list. We adapt our approach to address the characteristics of differing institutions. The following pages detail the core agenda, meetings required and information requested in advance of the visit.
We usually expect to focus on the following core control areas, for which more detail follows:

• governance
• audit arrangements
• financial management
• strategic management
• risk management.

We may also consider other areas.
We seek to place reliance on the work of the institution's internal auditors and an essential part of the review is to assess their work. We organize to meet with the internal auditors at their own offices in order to ask questions and also to examine their working files. This can take place either before or during the visit, to suit mutual convenience, and the information requested in advance includes coverage of their work.
We consider it important to meet with the Audit Committee Chairman and/or member(s). Would you please inform your Audit Committee of our visit and of our wish for a meeting.

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performance of all higher education institutions relative to each other', simultaneously, we are told that 'performance indicators are a range of statistical indicators *intended* to offer an objective measure of how a higher education institution (HEI) is performing' (HEFCE, 2004, emphases added). How would bureau controls cope in a world which did not include the words 'fairly' and 'intended'?

Such simplistic 'deconstruction' is an easy game and, of course, both statements may be contextually 'correct' – apparent contradictions are often merely the absence of linearity, not incoherence (Keenoy, 1999). In terms of narrative, such careful bureau-crafting may be designed merely to provide the illusion that squaring the measurement circle is a desirable idealized objective even if it remains a practical impossibility. For present purposes, the significance of such 'service scripts' is their semiotic endorsement of a range of desired normative

orientations in everyday managerial practice: they relentlessly drip-feed the prescribed managerial values which will be rewarded and – to over-generalize – within the mantra of 'value for (public) money', the valued behaviours all relentlessly privilege the ritualized pursuit of routinely audited comparative performative outcomes. Since 1989, all aspects of university administration and activity have been reframed in terms of this linguistic wallpaper and the measurement of academics' 'research performance' is merely one aspect of this 'macro' con-text. This is not to imply such scrutiny is without legitimacy. For, echoing the probable effect of the drip-feeding, a discourse of 'being accountable for public money' informed a significant number of respondents' self-conscious justifications for conforming to – or not resisting – the RAE. (Whether they are pragmatists or converts is impossible to say.)

Ideo-text

These con-texts provide the discursive ingredients deployed by both institutions and individual managers to leaven and elaborate their own social practices to refract HEFCE's auditable ambitions. The appearance of conformity costs nothing (discourse has its uses) and, unsurprisingly, individual customized 'adaptations' mimic the macro-scripts in relation to activities such as governance, performance management, purchasing or strategic planning. Such 'ideo-texts' – named as such because they specify managerially 'interested' outcomes (and constitute the bases of organizational 'ideo-cultures') – inform not only managerial decision making and daily procedural routines but also project the normative template for behavioural compliance and – to the extent that it is possible to observe or deduce such a reading – 'new' work expectations and legitimations. In essence, these ideo-texts detail a range of localized performativity measures and acceptable behaviours. They are associated with and reflected in a succession of organizational changes and innovations which appear to have reconfigured the character, experience and daily routines of 'university work' (of which 'academic work' is merely one aspect).

The RAE is one such ideo-text which, over time, has undergone a series of 'translations' both at the hands of policy makers and the academic managers who have been involved with enacting 'the RAE' into work processes. Among other things, such academics adopt their own modes of discursive participation in the text and devise their own forms of institutional reinforcement designed to meet the text's expectations of 'visible performativity' (Deem, 1998). Hence, successive RAE texts have been translated into more-or-less specific university, faculty/school and departmental level 'research strategies' with their attendant committee structures, monitoring procedures and practices intended to stimulate appropriate behaviours. Such 'policy', 'executive' and 'operational' artefacts

and texts enact and legitimize structural change, detail performance expectations, change work patterns and work loads, establish new reward systems and incentives and set the criteria on which new staff will be employed. Each of these elements can be interpreted as refracting the promotion of new values and orientations and are associated with the gradual introduction of new linguistic objects which symbolize and indicate priorities in the content of 'normal work'. For example, in many universities, it is now a 'normal' routine for 'individual research plans' (a relatively recent addition to the academic lifeworld) to be discussed during the annual appraisal (another recent artefact). While such 'target setting' may be couched in terms of individual development, simultaneously such talk reinforces and further 'normalizes' the ideo-text of performativity even if 'the RAE' is never mentioned during the course of the appraisal. Similarly, induction processes may signal significant ideo-texts. Commenting on his recent induction day, one respondent reflected:

> The thing that stuck me about the [talk] on teaching [was that it] purely focussed on the QAA and on the empirical measurement of our teaching [while] the research talk placed great emphasis on the RAE . . . and how significant this was to the Department and, 'yes, it's an imperfect system, but it's a competition and we want to win' and 'yes, it's the bottom line' . . . [these induction talks] were indicative of the priorities . . . [and] when they say research, they mean publications . . . you can't spend 10 years reading and researching [before you publish].

Of course, the organizing processes involved in enacting these ideo-texts are by no means as simplistic as this might imply for, nominally, universities are democratic institutions. Temporal habituation appears critical: it all 'takes time'. Managers have to devise 'acceptable' enactments and everyone has to become familiar with the new ideo-texts and their various possible acceptable interpretations. Academics have to participate in the text in order for it to circulate as an actor and this, unsurprisingly, seems to have occurred through a complex iterative process in which the writing on the wall tortuously mutates into that 'wallpaper'. And the process is not without significant discursive distancing and resistance. Typically, this is fuelled by appeals to the iconic imagery of 'academic freedom' and even within my elite departments there are some who continue resist the script of performativity (Keenoy, 2003). Not that such resistance matters overmuch: through time, as such individuals retire (or are retired), they are replaced by academics for whom the ideo-cultural performance expectations are merely another aspect of their 'instant' work culture. As one such observed:

> 'I don't like to say this, but I quite like it [the RAE] . . . I love writing . . . it's what we're supposed to be doing anyway.'

For such 'newcomers' with little experience of anything except the ideo-text of RAEability, there is nothing to 'resist'. They 'joined' the performativity

organizing process in mid-flow – no one is asking them to *change* how they work: it's what they are 'supposed to do'.

Finally on ideo-text, it is not being suggested that such texts are simplistic linear 'causal' mechanisms. As organizational artefacts, such texts circulate within the lifeworld and *contribute* to what François Cooren (2004) calls the 'translocation of constraints, capacities, abilities, and resources throughout the organization'; such texts 'participate, like other agents, in the daily production of organizational forms'. They articulate and 'motorize' particular modes of interaction.

Ego-text

At this point, it ought to be easy to shift from these ideo-texts to illustrate how they are refracted in the 'ego-text' of individual academics who, in the interviews, are 'reporting' on their experience of being an academic (in 2002). However, it is not only the ideo-texts which are refracted in what is spoken while 'making sense'.

Hence, first, some brief methodological assertions about my attempts to ensure a reflexive approach to the analysis. Despite Barthes (1977) and Derrida's (1976) reservations about 'authorship', there is nevertheless a sense in which *all* text is 'ego-text', for texts carry the fingerprints of all the various 'authors' implicated in their production (and re-production). For example, in *this* text you are (re-)reading, I am using the notion of 'ego-text' to refer to a complex of multiple interacting voices which collaborate – and may even collude – in conversational sense making, the means through which my 'interviews' (*not* my interviewees) produce their ephemeral interpretations of 'the RAE'.

There are several 'ego-texts' in play here. First, there is the unavoidable personal history and work experiences which 'I' – as a presumptively dispassionate researcher – used to frame the research focus and design the interview 'schedule'. Second, there is the 'I' who was involved in co-constructing each specific interview (and behaved differently in each of these exchanges). Third, there are all those other 'I's who agreed to be interviewed in the prior knowledge that, at a later date, they might get displayed for public approval or disapproval. And finally, there is the 'I' who is constructing this narrative to provide an interpretive gloss (with all those fragile presumptions of 'authority'). Each of these inter-related 'I's produce shifting interpolated meanings for others to (re-)read and (re-)interpret. One further, apparently deeply troublesome ego-textual complication is that the researcher is researching his or her own lifeworld (see Alvesson, 2003a, 2003b).

Clearly, the notion of 'ego-text' engenders a variety of epistemological and

BOX 2
An example of circulating ego-text(s)

. . . at the end of one relatively routine and uneventful 90-minute interview the interviewer asked the 'closure question':

Question: 'Is there anything I've not asked you about which you think is important?'

While, for the sake of form – 'we are, after all, academics in top-rated departments, aren't we?' – many interviewees felt impelled to find something to say to this inquiry, in many cases, it did not add anything of substance to the overall exchange. Interviewees had already been allowed the space to talk about whatever they wanted to within the confines of a script concerning their experience of 'work'. Indeed, in several instances, people said the equivalent of 'no, you've covered everything'. Of course, I hadn't; but at that point most would have felt they had given me enough of their time and that, maybe, it was time to return to their usual routines. In effect, such a question at that point in the process is more of a semiotic nicety; a polite way of saying 'I'm done here'. But, importantly, while it closes down the formal exchange, simultaneously, it opens up a more expansive, less constrained social space. It says: 'whatever you say now is not part of what we agreed to talk about in my formal letter to you … we can now go back to being "normal" colleagues.' The interviewee *should* be relaxed. On this particular occasion, in response to my semiotic cue, the interviewee said:

Respondent: 'The bureaucracy . . .'
Question: '. . . The bureaucracy?'
Respondent: 'I think here is the same as everywhere else . . . all the [QAA] rules you have to go through . . . which I would say are rubbish to do . . . [at this point, the interviewee stopped, remembered the context of the discursive exchange, and tried to retract this comment. Instantly realizing this was not possible, he then sought to reassure himself and inquired:] . . . this *is* confidential?' [and then laughed nervously].

What this seems to demonstrate is that, *even after 90 minutes* of an apparently casual conversation, this respondent remained conscious that he was 'front stage' not 'back stage'; that he was projecting – or felt he needed to project – a positive professional persona; that, at least in public, he did not wish to appear rash in judgement or publicly critical of the ideo-culture. Someone might hear? I rapidly colluded in this objective by reassuring him that anything to be published would be anonymised.

Source: Keenoy and Oswick (2005)

ontological quagmires and requires much greater elaboration than is possible here (Keenoy, forthcoming). For the present, the extract in Box 2 provides illustrative examples of all four forms of ego-text referred to earlier. And – for present purposes – the key methodological insight which emerges from any consideration of the reflexive nature of the research process is that interviews are complex co-constructed discursive artefacts in which both interviewee and interviewer are engaged in what Weick (1995) calls 'real-time collective sense making'. This process implicates identity, identity construction and identity projection.

Hence the conceptualization of the data to be analysed as 'ego-text'. This ego-text or – to be more precise, selected indicative snippets from various interview processes – will be deployed to illustrate and demonstrate the changing temporalities of the academic lifeworld consequent on the 'introduction' of the new managerialism (some 15 years beforehand). In short, 'ego-text' is the highly problematic resource we will employ to explore the 'sub-text'.

Sub-text

The prefix 'sub' carries multiple associations. In this context, it refers to the liminal aspects of ego-talk, or what we can rhetorically infer to be the implicit or unreflective or allusive possible meanings of – in this case – semiotic details.

Although I went 'looking for it', initially, there appeared little direct support for my expectation that interviewee ego-talk would provide a clear demonstration of how the 'social space' and 'social time' of my lifeworld was being re-configured through the subtle (and not so subtle) impact of the RAE ideotext. Understandably, respondents rarely framed their accounts spontaneously in terms of the changed spatio-temporal context (and I sought to avoid directly prompting 'suitable' answers). Subsequent relistenings focussed on a search for 'temporal proxies', that is, ego-text which could be interpreted as reflecting the changing temporalities of work activity and the experience of work. One possible proxy is text which appears to signify that people feel under pressure. This can take many forms, some more direct than others. For example, after some initial demographic questions, the first 'real' question asked is:

'What are your main work activities?'

One informant, a relatively inexperienced young woman, replied:

'I would put research first simply because of the pressure put onto me by the department followed by teaching and admin'.

In terms of her engagement in work, it seems clear the perception and experience of 'pressure' associated with her various tasks clearly prioritizes how she

relates to those tasks. Indeed, an anxious concern with 'research' was evident throughout the interview. It became most visible towards the end when informants are asked those very old-fashioned sociology-of-work questions:

'Can you list three things you like/dislike about your work?'

My reasoning for including these items at this point was that, after a series of very open-ended inquiries, the 'forced choice' specificity of such questions would be mildly disconcerting and might produce some revealing 'instant responses'. For once, it seemed to work. The first response about her dislikes was instant:

'The RAE'.

She then paused for thought in search of a second dislike. Eventually she began to talk about the '*research culture*' and then said:

'It's just too much'.

Another pause and then she added:

'The walls are constantly echoing research'.

According to Latour (cited in Seijo, 2005: 59ff), any social scientific generalization is merely a simplification of something which is invariably to be found in the minutiae of interaction for, 'when you want to understand an actor [i.e. the RAE], go and look though the net at the work it has traced'. This seemingly unreflective reference to walls echoing research is one such small detail for it encapsulates a singular – and possibly generalizable – image of the precisely the kind of reacculturation which the RAE ideo-text was designed to achieve at the level of 'internal experience'. To pursue the earlier metaphor, her summation might imply that 'the RAE' has transmuted from that bureau-crafted 'writing on the wall' through 'wallpaper' to become re-embodied in those anthropomorphized 'echoing walls'.

A second real-time example more visibly illustrates these liminal temporal dimensions. This exchange took place as I sat down to start the interview.

Q: How are you?
A: Eh? Oh not bad, not bad . . . I've got about a week and a half to write a conference paper . . . and haven't actually started it yet.

[He paused to do something before turning his attention to our scheduled interview, then continued]

A: I'm already thinking about 2006 because I've almost got my four papers for then . . . you get your four papers and then you can sit back and say, 'what do I really want to do?'

For context, it should be added that while talking to me he was in the middle of marking 40 essays which 'had to be done yesterday'. He is a very busy person. One might say he is a person with a chronic future orientation and his construction of the moment we meet vividly demonstrates the implicit temporal dimensions of text and their possible significance for his experience of work. (And, perhaps, that of others confronted with satisfying the same ideo-text?)

My casual inquiry appears to be interpreted literally: to 'How are you?' he gives what can be read as a description of how he is experiencing the present moment – 'Eh? Oh not bad, not bad'. He then instantly provides two related temporal reasons for this state: 'I've got about a week and a half to write a conference paper . . . and haven't actually started it yet.' His present is defined and dominated by his immediate future; at the same time he is living in both the past and the future. From the past he knows how long it will take him to produce the conference paper and his present agitated state appears to be fuelled by the apparent anxiety of meeting this future expectation. Once he has 'started', maybe he will 'feel' different? And, because I am a member of his 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), he is also unreflectively assuming that I will both understand and appreciate the complex range of tasks and juggled temporalities he is implicitly referring to. For anyone not on the inside, this exchange might be impenetrable.

The second part of the exchange – which also occurred unprompted – vividly illustrates how he locates his work 'in time' for this text incorporates references to his past, present and future activities. His present *is* his future for he locates his daily activities in an extended but specifically bounded temporal terrain: 'I'm already thinking about 2006' [i.e. the presumed date of the next RAE exercise; the interview took place just as the 2001 RAE was being been completed]. And, perhaps unreflectively, in referring to 'my four papers', he demonstrates the extent to which he has legitimized if not internalized the performance criteria. Note that he does not say what the actual content of his work is, merely that it adds up to 'four papers' – his chosen measure of achievement is quantity not substantive content. But there is also the telling temporal addendum to his performance orientation: 'then you can sit back and say "what do I really want to do?"'. In other words, he seems to be saying: 'once I've met the rules there will be the space and time to do what I really want to do'. In order to accomplish this he has to find some way of stealing back time for himself – like car workers on the assembly line, he seems to have done this by 'working back up the line'. Perhaps he is very busy creating that 'freedom' academics rhetorically claim to enjoy? Alternatively, this remark may merely have been a way of rationalizing his compliance with the performance culture while simultaneously signalling his academic 'authenticity' before we began to talk? We are, after all, 'colleagues' who 'respect' each other and who, like filmic Mafia bosses, need to embrace each other before we get down to our 'business' talk. Maybe it was

both these things? The only reasonably secure generalization that can be drawn from this ego-text is that temporal liminalities reflective of 'pressure' are visible *everywhere* in and about and around the text.

Some further indicative examples may help to secure this point. As noted earlier, the idea that there is now 'pressure to perform' is commonplace. Of interest here is how that 'pressure' is exerted in a lifeworld where direct control remains non-legitimate. How do such pressures become 'implanted' into daily routines? What kinds of discourses are involved? How is pressure applied? And how do people make sense of it while maintaining the conviction that they enjoy 'academic freedom'?[4] How do academic managers squeeze and sweat the spatio-temporal realm (mixed metaphors have their purposes)?

When asked to explain what she meant by 'The walls are constantly echoing research', the woman who said it replied:

> Well . . . basically pressure from the RAE . . . but I think the department doubles that up . . . a lot of stuff sent round by email [and] then there is the . . . I think she's called the Research Coordinator . . . and just the ambiance of the place.

A little further on in the exchange, she added:

> . . . I think the pressure's on even in terms of moving jobs . . . so you can't even think in terms of wanting to relax . . . You're just left there.

In answer to a similar inquiry, a young man on probation responded:

> I won't say it's a pressure which causes me nightmares . . . it's a thing I would do anyway . . . but [it's] not: 'I now need *this* publication, *this* year' . . . that's not how I perceive what's going on.

And another young man, also on probation, said:

> It [the RAE] doesn't worry me too much . . . I feel reasonably pressured . . . I feel more pressure to upgrade [i.e. publish in better-rated journals].

All these ego-texts come from young academics who entered the profession after the introduction of the RAE. What is notable about these accounts is the diffuse range of sources which appear to be implicated in 'producing' pressure. Buttressing the RAE ideo-text (and the appraisals and induction procedures mentioned earlier) are a wide range of other not always clearly identified actors inducing what might be called 'peripheral' pressure. Academics are circulating among circular emails, persons responsible for 'research', the possibility of looking for an alternative post, the generalized perception of the need to produce, an awareness that it is not just publication which 'counts' but also where the article is published, and within – as one of them notes – 'just the ambience of the place'. And, without reverting to anorak mode, it should be clear that all these responses refract the spatio-temporal frame within which academic work is now conducted – for the most part, it seems individuals are unreflectively

locating themselves within the 'RAE cycle'. The RAE is normal, sets the agenda and, in all probability, the pace of work.

This 'ambiance' seems to be reflected in the content, tone and character of the following remarks from a senior academic who was talking about how, in the light of RAE pressures, 'they' 'looked after' and 'protected' the interests of more junior staff:

> We play the numbers game . . . we have a portfolio approach to our CVs . . . we make sure we get publications in journals that are rated – those are where we get the RAE points – as well as putting in papers to encourage some newer journals . . . we try to get some kind of balance . . . we try to be broad and include all sorts of perspectives; for example, if someone got interested in the political science perspective, we'd say 'fine' [but] we look at the overall trajectory of publications [for that individual]. Each individual has a writing plan. . . it's difficult. . . everybody has a writing plan which they are working on . . . and we look at what's happening.

If this ego-text is an accurate approximation of social practice (for this ego-text also seems to doing a lot of 'identity work'), then it seems to represent a potentially highly controlled and pressurized environment. Despite the 'narrative of care' within which it was framed, the implied degree of structuring this 'care' involves seems to indicate that individual spatio-temporal freedom might be highly circumscribed. The 'ambiance' of the description, littered with directive verbs, resonates with Weber's categorical imperative: 'we play'; 'we make sure'; 'we get'; 'we try to be broad'; 'we'd say fine but'; 'everybody has'; and, finally, the potentially panoptic, 'we look'. Bearing in mind the difficulties involved in herding cats, it is not possible to say whether or not this script has been enacted but – as a metaphor for the kind of ideo-cultural changes wrought by the audit culture – it may be indicative of the kind of thinking which informs academics' social constructions of the 'narrative temporalities' we inhabit (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004).

Conclusion

Elsewhere (Keenoy, 1999) I have argued that the sometimes apparently contradictory facticities enacted in response to managerial ideo-texts can be better understood as mutually implicated holographic aspects of continuous organizational change processes. Of course, there is no specific point at which such processes 'start' or are 'completed'; such notions are merely convenient academic fictions we all employ to 'fix' and 'stabilize' social reality while we account for its movement (see, for example, the first two sections above). There is always another intertext which may (or may not) transform our present 'overstandings'.

In this piece, I have tried to sketch what an analysis of 'mutual implication' might begin to look like; and such processes are rarely linear (for an ingenious and immeasurably more convincing model of this, see Latour (1996)). The focus was one such managerial discourse, 'the RAE'; and, through the mutually implicated conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999) of *con-text*, *ideo-text*, *ego-text* and *sub-text*, the analysis which emerges illustrates how each of these aspects can be seen to be nested in and reflective of the others. The enactment and transmission of discursive action and artefacts in one aspect is refracted and translated in other aspects which also produce their own action and artefacts. Such processes are organic without ever becoming organistic, polyphonic, multilinear and recursive. Each step may be innocuous and seemingly marginal but – as has been shown – over time, 'new' realities have emerged as normalized properties of the academic lifeworld. It also appears that the discursive and material practices have transmuted almost ineluctably 'hand in hand' (such hands may be invisible but they are neither 'hidden' nor the ethereal limbs of some transcendental being or extra-social 'reality').

This latter point is, perhaps, exemplified in the analysis of the sub-text. The possible liminal meanings of those snippets of talk illustrate how (some) academic production workers – charged with demonstrating their performativity – engage with the ideo-text and how they (differentially) experience and respond to the ideo-text. What also seems clear is that while subjected to it they have also taken part in its (processual) (re-)constitution. In short, text can indeed 'face inwards and outwards at once'.

Notes

1. This was correct when the research was conducted. For the next RAE, scheduled for 2008, the evaluation criteria will change. See: http://www.rae.ac.uk/default.htm.
2. Coupland (2001), listening to graduate trainees, observes that: 'They draw on and refute commonly understood work place practices, while situating their identity in broader cultural projects. The participants attend to "norms" and "culture" while denying their relevance to their own particular patterns of behaviour' (p. 1103). Similarly, most of the academics in this study appeared to be both actively engaged in the 'RAE game' while simultaneously almost anxious to distance themselves from any responsibility for it. This 'fact' raises the question of the extent to which such talk reflects a ritualized antithetical element *within* the 'new ideo-culture'. It may be that occupational habituation shape-shifts at a subliminal as well as a conscious level (Marshak et al., 2000).
3. The notion of a 'con-text' may seem supercilious. But – just as the term 'therapist' breaks down into the ominous and, some might say, revealing term 'the rapist' – contemporary managerialist scripts can invariably be deconstructed into layers of meaning, some of which may involve the projection of unreflective deceptions: hence, con-text. This is certainly not to imply the RAE involves any self-conscious

attempt at ideological manipulation. It relates to the (relatively) innocent unintended consequences of ideo-cultural 'framing'.
4. Without exception, all the respondents declared that 'academic freedom' is 'one of the three things' they value about their work.

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