

### Satirical and Romantic Stories about Organisational Change. Actor Network Theory and Action Research

Moltu, Berit

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# Satirical and Romantic Stories about Organisational Change. Actor Network Theory and Action Research<sup>1</sup>

Berit Moltu

In this article different perspectives on organisational change are analysed using Hayden White's genre categories: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. White maintains that a "story" is not determined by data, events or the particular case, nor by the way events are remembered, collected or told. Narrative structures preconfigure; they determine in advance what is accepted as a story, and the meaning that will be created.

The empirical material for this article is mainly the literature on different perspectives on organisational change e.g. Actor Network Theory (ANT), Action Research (AR) and Business Process Re-engineering (BPR). In addition, and to contrast in the discussion of genre classification, literature from two different and well known perspectives from work and organisation are used e.g. critical sociology and Swedish pragmatic professional knowledge production.

The literature describing ANT is mostly of a satirical character, while the literature describing this type of participative action research is more romantic. BPR literature combines the satirical and the romantic genres. In addition, possible ramifications of this point of view, i.e., which strategies for change are seen or predominant within the different genres, and the implications for action are considered. To succeed in organisational change programmes I conclude that a switch between satiric and romantic narratives is needed.

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Different perspectives belonging to different genres, predefining what conclusions we are going to see, what actions are seen as possible, provide a reflexive insight on how facts are produced. Being aware of these predefined limitations within the genres gives academics the possibility to understand, or even the freedom to choose, where to belong.

**Key words:** Acton Research (AR), Science and Technologystudies (STS), Actor Network Theory (ANT), Organisational development (OD), Genres

## **Introduction**

The starting point of this article is based on my doctoral thesis “BPR på norsk!” (Moltu 2004) – a study of the reorganisation of a process facility based on a management concept that was popular in the 1990s, known as *Business Process Reengineering* (BPR) or process organising (Hammer/Champney 1993). The aim of this project was the reorganisation of maintenance to be integrated in the daily process of work to rationalise and reduce costs. The alternatives were the outsourcing of maintenance which was highly controversial, or as proposed by the workers themselves to increase rather than decrease the numbers of maintenance workers in order to keep competence and qualified knowledge within the plant. I followed the BPR project in the process plant for 1½ years, mainly by doing participative observation and interviews with most of the actor groups in the project at different times. The project was initiated by the management and facilitated by first internal consultancies from the company’s own R&D department, then after not succeeding in the efforts, also by external consultancies.

In my thesis I used ANT as an approach to understanding organisational change projects. In reorganising maintenance, according to the BPR concept, the consultancies suggested integrating process work and maintenance in multidisciplinary teams to “empower” employees. They also used “broad participation” as a change strategy, a notion more known in Norwegian participatory action research than in the management literature of BPR. The meeting of these different perspectives in the controversy of the reorganisa-

tion project made me start asking what kind of stories on organisational change are told in the management literature on BPR, different to the stories told in these two different perspectives used on organisational change, actor network theory (ANT) and action research (AR), two traditions that have been dominant in Trondheim in research and education within organisation, technology and change<sup>2</sup> and where I have my professional background, although there has been relatively modest exchange between these two research communities

Action research is a broad tradition with many different specialities or subtraditions. Even in Norway there are at least three different main directions; a collaboration tradition in worklife, a participative system design connected to ICT and users participation in system design (Kristen Nygård and Pelle Ehn), and a tradition in the beginning connected to the reformation of the jail system (KROM, criminal care in freedom) (Thomas Mathisen and Inger Louise Valle). The tradition of action research discussed in this article is within the collaboration in worklife tradition, situated in Trondheim which has a long-standing tradition within action research or so-called action-oriented research, which focuses on collaboration relations between employees' and employers' organisations, among researchers, and between researchers and their subjects. Participation as a phenomenon is fundamental in this tradition. One of the central articles<sup>3</sup> was on the concept of co-generative learning (Elden/Levin 1991; Elden, 1979) focusing on these notions of collaboration both between employers and employees, between insiders and outsiders in a company e.g. action researchers and those working in the company. This participative perspective based on harmony, collaboration and dialogue rather than conflict, fight and confrontation is the one I use in this article, a Norwegian version of Participative action research (PAR).

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<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Organizationl and work life research at NTH, (Norwegian institute of technology) with its sister institute at SINTEF, IFIM (Institute of social research in industry), and Center for Technology and Society, AVH, now Institute of crosscultural studies, both Trondheim Norway.

<sup>3</sup> Authors as Einar Thorsrud, Fred Emery, E. Trist, Phillip Herbst and Bjørn Gustavssen also belong among the Norwegian "core" authors in this collaborative tradition.

In this article I wish to analyse the two traditions ANT and PAR as narratives. I will attempt to say something about the types of stories being told in the literature on ANT and PAR. To contrast the discussion I also analyse the management literature of BPR and two well known traditions within work and organisation; critical sociology of work and a Swedish tradition on professional knowledge based on American pragmatism and Wittgenstein. The analysis (deconstruction) will be based on the genres tragedy, romance, comedy and satire introduced by Hayden White. In addition to classifying the texts, I will discuss how the different genres deal with the underlying questions of management policy.

To summarise, there are three different research questions posed in this article. The overall question is where do ANT and PAR meet, where do they differ? What genres do the different perspectives belong to, and what implications for action follows the genres, and which strategies according to the genres are the most likely to succeed in organisational development projects?

### **ANT and PAR as storytelling?**

The analytical approach in this article is based on the genres used by the culture historian Hayden White (1973). White maintains that a “story” is not determined by data, events or the particular case, nor by the way events are remembered, collected or told. Narrative structures pre-configure; they determine in advance what is accepted as a story and the meaning that will be created. The narrative description contains actual statements, arguments, linguistic images, plots, and archetypal narrator structures, as well as mythical and ideological aspects (White 2003: 8). White focuses on four genre categories or plot structures: *the romance*, *the comedy*, *the satire* and *the tragedy*.

The *romantic* story is characterized by optimism: the protagonist is redeemed, virtue triumphs over sin, light conquers darkness and goodness is rewarded. The *comic* genre is not as optimistic as the romance. Here, humans may achieve temporary triumphs and victories or concurrence of interests. Developments have a higher purpose, which often is hidden from us. In the *tragedy* the future looks depressing. This genre is characterised by resigna-

tion, pessimism, the death of heroes and unsuccessful projects. Determinism is also characteristic for tragedies. The *satire* reveals the fictive and constructive nature of the other genres. The satire is sceptical and relativistic; it highlights human stupidity and our lack of ability or capacity to put the world in order. We may use these rough definitions as a basis for analysing stories within the field of organisation, addressing such topics as management theory, work sociology, or even empirical material.

### **Satirical and tragic stories about BPR**

First I present some examples of BPR management literature read as narratives. An explicit assumption in Hammer and Champy (1993:7) is that flexible, smooth, innovative and dedicated companies are wanted that are able to adjust to altered market conditions and bring forward new products and technology at a competitive price, while delivering maximum quality and customer service. Their account of BPR is not a very flattering characterisation of American companies and their alleged crisis:

So, if management want companies to be lean, nimble, flexible, responsive, competitive, innovative, efficient, customer focused, and profitable, why are so many American companies bloated, clumsy, rigid, sluggish, non-competitive, uncreative, inefficient, disdainful of customer needs, and losing money? The answer lies in how these companies do their work and why they do it that way.

They go on to present examples which show that the results obtained by these companies often differ from the results wanted by the management. The root of all evil is in the division of labour and the accompanying fragmentation and specialisation of work. Hammer and Champy (1993: 30) end up mocking and deriding bureaucracy and the large number of middle managers, which they see as a result of this division of labour, and which must be done away with, using BPR strategies such as organising the work around processes:

Inflexibility, unresponsiveness, the absence of customers' focus, an obsession with activity rather than result, bureaucratic paralysis, lack of innovation, high overhead – these are the legacies of one hundred years of American industrial leadership. (...) America's business problem is that it is entering the twenty-first century with companies designed during the

nineteenth century to work well in the twentieth. We need something entirely different.

Such classical BPR stories are satirical in their descriptions of real organisations and work processes. The tone is sceptical and relativistic, focusing on the employees' lacking competence and inability to achieve stated goals. However, lacking abilities and competence are not a given destiny. As inefficiency is a product of inadequate organisational structures, the solution lies in better management and better organisation, for instance through outsourcing of different kinds of work. Thus, the hidden plot contains distinct romantic features, in which the good and the new (BPR) are going to win over the old and the antiquated, e.g., Total Quality Management (TQM) strategies.

### **Critical sociology of work, a deterministic tragedy**

Analyses of BPR within the sociology of work employ a different narrative structure. In critical studies we find an explanation of BPR that follows the pattern of the tragedy (Knight and Willmott 2000; Mumford and Hendrics 1996; Grint 1997): hopeless situations, positions of loss, dilemmas and unresolved conflicts between values of the same rank. These analyses claim that BPR is a traditional Tayloristic rationalisation strategy in a new guise; they see it as yet another attempt at getting employees to work harder and to accept increasing control from the management. From the perspective of the sociology of work, BPR is a story in which the future is depressing. At best, attempts at effectuating BPR fail because such adjustment projects often fail.

The tragic narrative is quite dominant within radical circles in the field of the sociology of work. The classic work by Braverman (1974) is a typical example. The narrator is resigned and sees little hope. Work becomes increasingly degraded. Less qualified manpower is needed, and management's control becomes stronger and stronger. Critics of Braverman (e.g. Littler 1982; Burawoy 1979) employ the same narrative strategy: The future is still depressing, but the story is less mechanical and deterministic than in Braverman's version. This is because they are more interested in the employees' resistance to the management's strategies – a resistance that finds its expression in comical accounts by the employees. One of the recent work of

critical sociology by Arie Russell Hochschild (1983) I also consider such an example.

### **Romantic stories of practice building**

A group of working life researchers based in Stockholm (Göranzon 1990; Josefson 1991; Perby 1995; Johannessen 1999; Hammarén 1999) have become deeply engaged in the study of professional knowledge. They produce romantic stories about this knowledge, in part through their insistence on continuity in professional knowledge. Having good judgement and tacit knowledge is characteristic of being educated or competent, and this knowledge is refined and developed through experience and reflection. Knowledge is valued to the extent that it is substantial and useful. Tacit knowledge may be perceived as what is desired, what is covered as a hidden treasure. It is this tacit knowledge that is “the redeeming element”.

In summary, management literature on BPR mainly produces satirical stories about working life in order to prepare for BPR, while attempts to succeed in employing organisational change may be read as romantic stories in their efforts to build new practice. The traditional sociology of working life has produced mainly tragic stories from working life about the loss of competence and knowledge, with a few exceptions such as the Swedish tradition with its romantic stories of professional knowledge. So far we have considered the traditions from organisation and worklife and management. Now we move to the two approaches ANT and PAR.

### **Actor-network work theory as a kind of sensitivity**

Actor-network theory (ANT) is part of a constructivist tradition called *Science and Technology Studies* (STS), which became widespread during the 1980s. The common denominator for this tradition is inquiry into the social processes that create scientific facts and technology. The point of departure is that these are the result of processes, production and action. It is not true that objects, technology and facts are ready-made or true. All production of facts, truth and technology should be studied in the same way. According to this symmetry principle, the same type of explanation should be used for both

successes and failures. Throughout the history of science there has been a tendency to explain successes in terms of reality, while failures have been explained in psychological and sociological terms. Bloor (1991) maintains that the same type of explanation should be used for both. ANT has been identified as the most important contribution within the field of STS, especially by Bruno Latour in his book *Science in Action* (1987).

Actor-network theory, which was initially called “the sociology of translation” (Callon 1986), is perhaps not a theory in a traditional sense. Some will say that it is a metaphor -- others that it is a method. ANT may also be a perspective, a tool or a sensitivity used to investigate a phenomenon. I also like to consider it as a set of conditions, a mind-set and thereby a sensitivity, something other than mechanical, methodical techniques. ANT is about how science or facts are created through the establishment of actor-networks. The nets consist of individuals, material conditions and vested interests that work together to preserve knowledge. Phenomena or facts are relevant and have impact, as long as relations are created that are strong enough and extensive enough, which shifts the focus from *being right* to *being recognised as right*.

Delegation is a key concept in the forming of actor-networks (Latour 1992). In delegation, human action is replaced by non-human action, and delegation relies on the conception that human actors may be disciplined. Delegation is based on relatively stable ideas as to how objects may be used. Through our connections with objects, we are bound, normalised and restricted. One example is the father who takes his little boy on a bus where there is a sign saying that passengers are not allowed to stand in the gangway. The boy does not obey orders, and the father must use his arm to keep the boy on the right spot in the bus. In order to avoid this problem, a steel bar is eventually mounted in the bus. The boy is now transformed from a disobedient boy into an obedient boy who is standing in the right place. There has been a change from words to steel, and the father’s job of holding the boy with his arm has been delegated to the steel bar. The steel bar is thereby turned into an actor which plays a part in ensuring that other actors must change their path of motion: the little boy is “forced” by this new actor to stand to the right in the bus. Through this delegation we become part of a technology network.

ANT analyses, which are based on the so-called *translation model* (Callon 1986, 1987), demonstrate the kind of challenges facing claims of scientific fact and new technologies on their way to being accepted or rejected. The translation consists of four elements. *Problematisation* is about how to be indispensable by being someone who knows something or has something that others need. *Interessement* is about how allies may be connected to the growing network that is being constructed in order to be implicated in the problematisation. Interessement means that roles and tasks are attributed to allies – whether human or non-human. *Enrolment* refers to a set of strategies that are used to define and connect the various alliance roles. Enrolment takes place as versatile negotiations that are required in order to succeed in interest creation. *Mobilisation* of allies is about ensuring that spokespersons are present to represent the various relevant groups. Taken to the extreme, ANT may be reduced to a Machiavellian bundle of power strategies, but such reduction results in a substantial loss of insight. ANT is an action theory as well, which describes a process as a combination of *movement* and *stabilising*.

#### **ANT and PAR – two icons caved out of the same log<sup>4</sup> or two different projects?**

Methodological relativity has been an important principle within ANT. The reasoning behind this principle is that scientific success and failure should be explained by means of the same methods and concepts. Previously, there was a tendency to explain successes in terms of nature, i.e., a scientific success is due to the fact that a truth of nature or the essence of a phenomenon has become evident to the researcher. Failures, on the other hand, are explained using sociological or psychological concepts, such as irrationality. This principle, the so-called principle of symmetry, also involves treating human and non-human actors similarly.

The method indicates that a controversy or a scientific disagreement should be traced and studied with a focus on processes. Using a controversy

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<sup>4</sup> INtertextuality to Levin (1994)

as a research strategy is totally different from considering the merit or truth of a phenomenon or trying to study the phenomenon's essence. The question of whether there is little or much participation is often used in the participative action research literature. A question commonly asked is whether the involvement is effective. More attention is paid to the phenomenon's essence and truth than within ANT. In order to be able to trace the controversies, it is impossible to start with "the true" controversies defined in advance, whatever they may be. It is more important to find the interesting controversies. Using almost any strategy or means is allowed, in order to convince the reader, listener or opponent of what are the interesting issues and how phenomena, science, facts etc. are created. One is freer to be playful. Thus, humour is an element in ANT research. PAR tends to be very serious; "truth is no laughing matter", to be a bit impertinent. Bearing "the oppressed" and "social class" on one's shoulders is a heavy burden – no wonder romantic stories about progress are needed in order to persevere.

Within actor-network theory there is no division between the micro and macro levels – a complex notion. The metaphor of the actor network, or a seamless web, is used to describe this synthesis. Much of the action research has chosen to study marginalised groups "from below" in order to give the under-privileged or the silent groups a voice. Feminists have criticised ANT for studying "from above", meaning those who are defining and building, enrolling and allying themselves with others in order to maintain an actor network, i.e., the empire builder or the entrepreneur. I would prefer to say that ANT begins from a centre position than "from above" or "from below", as it is not obvious in advance which position is strong or weak. We are all part of various actor networks, marginalised or strong, varying from one setting to another.

The principle of symmetry implies different researcher ideals or researcher roles for ANT than for PAR. One prerequisite for the symmetry principle is that the researcher should be "neutral", or at least detached and not committed, in relation to the controversies she or he is studying. When studying a scientific controversy, or for instance a controversy about gas-works, the controversies should be analysed without considering who is right. The actors and points of view should be treated symmetrically, with a focus

on analysing how they argue and act. Some circles find this position provocative. Much of the action research has endeavoured to secure better science for the people, to show solidarity with “the underdogs” and to produce knowledge in accordance with their interests, reflecting a desire to democratise science. This implies a totally different researcher ideal, a more involved and active position. While ANT aims to describe how something is created and constructed (in other words showing how change is generated), PAR seeks to play a part in the on-going processes, to create change. This reveals a significant disparity between ANT and PAR, even though Latour in his latest book (2004) is quite insistent on the need for a democratisation of science and he is relatively normative as to how this should be done. His position might be seen as a romantic twist in the otherwise satirical ANT literature, to which I will return later in this article.

Within ANT the concept of action is related to the activities and movement of actants and actors – a production perspective. In action research, the concept of action has largely been perceived as creating or contributing to the initiation of changes. ANT primarily studies processes, dynamics, flow and how phenomena are created. In PAR the object of study is the given, what already exists. The ontologies differ. When studying “the given”, ontology is separated from epistemology. ANT does not have such a distinction. Within ANT the object of study is construed, created reality, and this does not involve non-deterministic explanations. A central objective of participative action research has been that research should contribute to democratisation, and that research activity should be emancipatory. ANT “opens up the black boxes” and points at *how things could have been different*. Deconstructing that which is fixed, which is one aspect of ANT’s programme, might have an emancipatory effect. This also affects our way of dealing with the world and our attitudes – another way in which research can be “emancipatory”.

Co-determination vs participation B. Nylehn has argued that defining co-determination as a special variety of participation is unnecessary (Nylehn 1994). Co-determination assumes negotiations between equals, while participation implies influence within boundaries determined by the employer. Participation is considered difficult because of a basic conflict of interest between the management’s right to manage and the employees’ wish for

autonomy and democracy. According to Nylehn, co-determination is unattainable because this conflict of interest constitutes the company. He says that “only representative co-determination may challenge this conflict”. Likewise, Anne Marie Berg (1998) concludes that there will always be an element of tension between power, authority and management on the one side and delegation, autonomy and co-determination on the other. I disagree with Nylehn and Berg, based on my conviction that ANT as a new perspective may challenge and revitalise the literature on co-determination. In my study of the use of knowledge to legitimise co-determination in a process of reorganisation based on BPR (Moltu 2000, 2004a), I concluded that using ANT as a perspective and a tool, organisations may be seen more as translations of interests and networks than as a product of political negotiations. Moreover, ANT incorporates more actors than the binary conflict between employees and employer indicates. The actors are not given in advance but are constituted in the actual controversy. The basic conflict of interest that Nylehn maintains constitutes the company is negotiable and changeable, and we become able to see new conflicts of interest and new communities of interest. Thus, co-determination might manifest itself in other *shapes*.

### **Different comprehensions of power**

The distinction between co-determination and participation brings us to the different comprehensions of power. Within ANT, power is something that is produced. Thus, power is not a fixed entity, but rather something that must be created, produced and maintained. Power can be obtained, but not indefinitely, for it is both a local phenomenon and unstable. Assuming predetermined conflicts of interest between two parties, the PAR literature has a more static understanding of power. . If someone has a lot of power, someone else has correspondingly less. The pie is finite: If you negotiate a good wage settlement, someone else gets less. Power becomes a charged word with negative associations and is often synonymous with power injustice. If the amount of power is fixed, direct participation as an alternative to organised bargaining or representative participation is thus a threat to the trade unions, as illustrated by the title of a report from a Norwegian research foundation

with close links to the trade unions (“Co-players or opponents?”, Hagen/Pape 1997). If power is more productively constitutive, this opens the way for new constellations and new relations. Then power is not only a way of being or becoming powerful, but it becomes a positive factor that may produce new possibilities and changes.

In order to understand the concept of power within ANT, it may be useful to make use of programmes of action in which actants chain themselves together in larger programmes (Latour 1992). Programmes of action may be understood as a coherent set of action *inscriptions* that the actors involved are instructed to follow. Here is an example: It is a well-known phenomenon that hotel guests often forget to return their key when leaving a hotel. The guests who do return the key on their own follow the expected programme of action. However, many people neglect to return their key. Perhaps they take it home with them, thereby forming an anti-programme. After some time, the hotel manager starts informing his guests to drop off their key every time someone leaves the hotel, thus involving more people in his programme. In order to reinforce this, he delegates the job to a sign which says the exact same thing. Now they are two. This enrolls a few more people, and the anti-programme consists of increasingly fewer people. The last action from the hotel manager is to attach a large ball to the key, which means that if you are carrying the key in your pocket it will bulge and you will be aware that you are carrying the room key. Now there are three actants saying the exact same thing: the hotel manager, the sign and the ball. The persons remaining in the anti-programme are most probably those who wish to steal a hotel key with a large ball attached, for unknown purposes. This is understood as unstable power. This means that power is not produced once and for all, and that programmes as well as anti-programmes demand constant maintenance.

Traditional involvement research is based on a traditional power concept, thus yielding a traditional understanding of who are powerful and who are powerless. ANT redefines the concept of power. More people may have power, and power is neither good nor evil. It is a result more than something that is given in advance. The powerful may also be powerless. The delegations of the so-called powerful may not have any effect; the scripts may be neglected and/or rewritten. ANT does not use “A leads to B” as an explana-

tory model, as is the case for much of the involvement research. ANT produces a more open scenario of who might be involved and what effects are possible or relevant.

An organisational development project is part of a more or less effective action plan, intended to make people act in certain ways. The objective may be to get people to work in multidisciplinary teams, to be a process based organisation or to use management by objectives. When there is correspondence between the intentions of the initiators, the choice of technological instruments and the wishes of the employees, you may have a strong programme. Problems arise when some people do not wish to join the programme, or when the technological instruments are not pulling in the same direction. Such actants may form an anti-programme.

Participative action research literature addresses the dichotomy between power and anti-power. Anti-power is not the same as anti-programme. Anti-power is a purely social concept, while non-human actors are part of programmes/anti-programmes. Passivity and different kinds of undermining (subversive) strategies (as outlined by Egil Skorstad (1999) and Sverre Lysgaard's ([1961] 1985) team formations) are traditional examples of anti-power, which in the literature has been called resistance towards change. But this is a reactive, passive and limited strategy; it is a strategy that is limited by the clash of interests between the management and the employees. However, this is the only perception within this approach.

Let me present an alternative from the perspective of ANT, using my case in the processing plant (Moltu 2004a). The organisational development project had proposed outsourcing of the maintenance work to subcontractors. This was in accordance with the existing action programme, i.e., the organisational development programme based on BPR. The maintenance workers took the initiative, proposing and putting forth arguments to justify a counter-measure that would focus all the effort on training and development of their competence. They argued that the plant should increase rather than decrease the number of maintenance workers, since that competence disappears with the employees, and both knowledge of the plant and occupational expertise are acquired through experience at the plant. Further, this competence is essential in with the event of a production halt at the plant. Occupational

expertise is explained by the fact that there is a connection between the maintenance worker and the plant, the design of the processing plant, the costs caused by a production halt and the length of the down time, all actants in the same anti-programme!

The strategy of the maintenance workers to cultivate their own occupational expertise, based on practice and experience, may be seen as a much more enterprising and autonomous anti-programme than resistance towards change, collective action or undermining strategies. In addition, this initiative contains elements of self-esteem and occupational pride, as opposed to more passive undermining strategies or collective action.

### **ANT and PAR – a satirist and a romantic?**

Based on the preceding discussion, I consider participative action research a romantic narrative that focuses on creating processes, on bringing about change. The objective is to build something, as in the Swedish tradition, to succeed in something, to create new practice. The tradition of co-operation between employees' and employers' organisations, which is characteristic for the Norwegian participative action research (Elden/Levin 1991) with its emphasis on harmony, interaction and continuity, may also be classified as a romantic project in its optimistic belief that planned organisational change is possible. Thus, literature on co-determination is more of a project marked by resignation and thus belonging to the tragedy.

On the other hand, the research on co-determination research is characterised by disruptions and conflicts, thereby becoming more of a tragic story. Because of the given conflicts of interest in working life – between the management's right to manage based on proprietary rights and the employees' wish for democratic autonomy – Nylehn (1994) finds co-determination to be impossible.

We may consider ANT, with its deconstruction of familiar perspectives and texts, a satirical narrative (Figure 1). Often, ANT is a story about disruption as well. Much of the earlier ANT research used humour as irony, thereby appearing sceptical and relativistic to existing knowledge regimes, as when applying traditional research methods. ANT began as an "opposition project"

that undermined prevailing theories. That which is sceptical and relativistic can indeed undermine an existing hegemony. But as ANT has gained ground itself in the academic world, obtaining a position of greater hegemony, being satirical becomes almost unethical. The romantic narrative is more normative and moralistic than the satirical one. Yet ANT literature is not static, but in constant flux, (Law 2004) and recently ANT has shifted into a more romantic genre (e.g., Latour 1999, 2004). The pendulum is swinging back to a certain degree; – positions are no longer so absolute, and a meeting ground between ANT and participative action research seems to be emerging.

**Figure 1: PAR versus ANT seen as narratives according to genre category**

Empirical text	Genre classification
Literature on participation, (Norwegian participative action research)	Romantic
Pragmatical professional knowledge building	Romance
Literature on co-determination	Tragic
Critical sociology of work	Tragic
Actor-network theory (ANT)	Satirical
Business process reengineering (BPR)	Satirical

### **Participative action research as factish?**

This brings us to one last point. We know that ANT is about wielding or creating power. ANT is also an action theory that describes a process as a combination of *movement* and *stabilising*. In response to the critics of ANT, who see it only as a strategic, instrumental tool, Latour (1999) has introduced the concept “factish” – which is a combination of the words facts and fetish. “Factish” suspends the division between faith and knowledge. One of the most important characteristics of participative action research, which has given rise to significant objections against it, is that it has been a mixture of subjects, politics and ideology (Berg 1998). Perhaps we, using Latour, may call participative action research “factish”, thereby helping to enhance its status in academic circles?

**PAR and ANT; dangerous or permanent liason?**

Latour's new action theory (1999: 243) heads in a more pragmatic direction. He tries to cancel the division between action and behaviour by introducing the expression *a slight surprise of action*. The division between action and behaviour traditionally distinguishes between human and non-human actors, while ANT uses an action concept that places all actors on equal footing by not assigning intention to an action. Latour says that scientists create facts, but whenever we create something we are not in command; we are *slightly overtaken* by the action, as any construction worker knows. He goes on to say that "*I am always slightly surprised by what I am doing. What is acting through me is also surprised by what I am doing with it, by the possibilities to mutate, to change.*" (Latour 1999). The action is not simple (something a subject is doing to an object); on the contrary, the action is part of an *event*, which is a new concept introduced by Latour to define what is done together with others (humans and non-humans). Events determine the unique opportunities made possible or brought about by the surroundings – a dynamic scene where the actors are able to connect to others. This is something radically other than what is traditionally considered intentional action. Further, Latour uses *proposition* to indicate what these other actors may offer or bring in of action (these others are not objects or ideas, but propositions), what they might be for others, and what they have to offer to the action. This is strikingly new in relation to what we know from theory of exchange in sociology. But perhaps most importantly, this new action theory indicates a romantic twist with its emphasis on pragmatic knowledge in the otherwise satirical ANT, and this, it seems to me, is now where these two traditions meet.

Latour's new action theory gives us dramatically new ways of viewing organisational development – not as planned strategic intentional actions that others should be included in (for instance the linear stage divisions of organisational development, which are rationalistic theories), for these are often failures.; . Perhaps ANT's most important contribution to the collaboration literature is a better understanding of organisational development, or planned change as it is also called, and why this often fails. Organisational development may possibly be perceived as establishing arenas that facilitate *a slight surprise of action* instead of implementing intentional strategies. If this is the

case, perhaps we proponents of ANT could make overtures to scholars within participative action research again – to suggest a meeting between techno-science and pragmatic action theory, *the slight surprise of action*, e.g. professional knowledge, more specifically professional academic knowledge. And if we propose a meeting between techno-science and pragmatic action theory, hopefully we will no longer be talking about dangerous liaisons, but about more permanent relations?

### **The significance of genres for action**

In this article, ANT and PAR are discussed as different perspectives on organisation and technology, with power and change as two key concepts in the field of organisational development. Management literature refers to and understands the lack of successful organisational change by talking about resistance towards change (Daft 1989: 294; Omholt/Nesse 1992: 292; Hammer/Champy 1993: 112; Hammer 1996: 206-212; Willoch 1994). In this perspective, resistance towards change is often perceived on an individual psychological level: Human beings have an inherent fear of change, and this fear must be overcome.

In my doctoral thesis I showed that management narratives about the organisation of working life today are largely satirical. This is as expected, based on the prevailing tone of management literature on BPR, which tends to be ironic and to mock the ineffective and dysfunctional nature of contemporary organisation. Further, it is to be expected that the employees' stories in this BPR project would correspond to the main trajectory within working life sociology, which largely presents tragic stories about loss of knowledge and competence and hopeless, inevitable changes. The conclusion of my thesis is that the employees in this processing plant present a more pro-active, romantic counter narrative (Moltu 2004a). In my empirical organisational development project, the controversy of maintenance, maintenance worker Arenas defines top competence as being based on experience and practical knowledge. He also strongly advocates the development of communities of practice at work. This narrative contains a compelling argument for commitment (Johannessen 1997: 51) as something which gives direction and sub-

stance to knowledge. Arenas draws attention to the fact that those who are permanent employees have stronger ties to the plant, or feel more responsible for the plant than those who are temporary workers. This focus on know-how and the benefit of knowledge may be interpreted as a romantic story about professional knowledge (Moltu 2004).

Given the satirical stories of orthodox BPR literature (Hammer & Champy 1993) about the situation in companies, and the need for process mapping of competence in order to get rid of redundant working processes, comical counter-stories might be expected that mock the management, the organisational development project and the management concept, pointing out how superficial and stupid these are. Tragic counter-stories could possibly be anticipated, dealing with how bad the results will be when the workers' competence is deskilled. However, this is not what happened. Instead, a much more pro-active, romantic counter-story was produced, revealing an optimistic and rationalist view of knowledge. It is a modernistic story in its belief in progress and reason. This is on par with BPR's optimistic stories, but they are not superficial. The romantic story says that knowledge is acquired from practice. This knowledge, which is often tacit and invisible, is based on experience; the apprentice-master relationship in particular is essential for the development of skilled and competent workers.

The workers' romantic narrative deals with the underlying ideological questions in a slightly surprising way. Here, the workers are neither conservative nor radical; instead, they promote a mixture of anarchist and liberal ethics. They neither call for system changes nor defend the existing order; instead, they promote a sort of anarchism where each individual must contribute in his own way. If you are not a competent professional it is no use – then you have to leave – but the skilled and competent workers may contribute. There is something constructive in the romantic story, which tells about the workers' contributions. The fact that the workers respond to a BPR programme in such a pro-active and positive manner is surprising in light of the classical studies of work sociology, which mainly focus on the degradation of work and loss of professional knowledge. As mentioned earlier, management literature conceptualises the reactions to an organisational change project as resistance towards change, explained by dread and fear, and

resulting in paralysis or apathetic action. This is quite different from the positive and pro-active stories I came across in my field work.

On a sociological level, resistance towards change may be viewed as a collective action, as seen in Lysgaard's working team ([1961] 1985). In this team a collective formation is produced as a resistance to or buffer against the demands of the insatiable technical-economical system. Several of the classical work sociological studies have been classified as tragic stories, in which the technical-economical system meets the workers in a rather deterministic way, and they can do nothing about it. This is a perspective and an attitude that may result in paralysis as well as apathy. Collective formation may be viewed as a depressive action, which turns inwards and is somewhat apathetic in relation to measures that are introduced, such as a BPR programme or a programme for organisational change.

### **Professional pride as an indicator of a non superficial romantic story from maintenance?**

Much of the resistance to change in the direction of integrating operation and maintenance might be ascribed to professional pride. Many people take pride in doing excellent work. It is also important to distinguish between cutting-edge competence and other competence. A trade is a question of identity, it is something that conveys respect, status and influence. Being able to perform work that not just anyone can do is important. To the efficiency expert, what looks like a logical practice of dividing the pie in a new way (in accordance with a rational BPR process approach) tampers with other profound structures such as professional pride and identity. This is also reflected in the debates about core expertise. When, in BPR projects, work processes and core expertise are defined, this is a desktop process that does not take into account negotiations and the structure of already existing trades. Integration in multidisciplinary teams may also result in a de-skilling of the work, thus evoking an automatic resistance among the people wanting top competence, challenges and recognition. Focusing on professional pride and professional identity is quite different from traditional resistance to change. In the first

place, it is a more worthy project, and moreover it may yield insights in the literature about resistance to change.

### **Conclusion**

Controversies around organisational changes, known as actor network work (Latour 1987), are often about building one's own interests and undermining those of others. The story is used as part of an industrial action. There is a tug of war regarding which stories should be valid. The romantic story is well suited to build your own interests, in the form of a story about either the need for top competence or the need for process organisation and re-engineering according to the BPR-concept. A group of workers was highly successful in telling a romantically constructive narrative about the need for their competence (stories about what they are good at and how they became good at this). In this way, their narrative is a contribution to the debate about how to define the company's core expertise. Such stories are unifying within a department, they create solidarity when that which is local or internal defines nearness and what you want to embrace. Management literature also has romantically constructive stories about the solutions management wants to implement, i.e., process organisation and re-engineering. The revolution metaphor, which is used in BPR-literature, supports a romantic story, but according to the BPR programme the management has not succeeded in constructing such a romantic story. This is part of the problem when trying to implement BPR in an enterprise.

As opposed to the romance, the satire is a story seen from the outside with distance. It tends to undermine and to weaken the other party's interest. The satirical stories of management literature function in the same way – by mocking at, and speaking ironically of, today's way of organising companies, they undermine the existing order and pave the way for a reconstruction or re-engineering of what has been torn down through the satirical story. In my empirical material I have not encountered the comic narrative. Thus, the implications of the comedy for company policy appear as rather diffuse in this context. I am also unable to find the tragic narrative in my empirical material from the processing plant. The workers' stories from the company I

was studying could just as well have been tragic stories about the degradation of work and loss of occupational knowledge as a result of a deterministic organisational change programme based on BPR. That would most likely have led to paralysis and apathy amongst the workers.

**Figure 2: Various professional traditions and the stories of actor-groups analysed according to genre categories and their implications for action. Results for the different actor groups in the OD controversy is based on empirical discoveries (Moltu 2004a)**

Empirical text	Genre classification	Implications for policy implementation
Participative action research (PAR) Participation literature The professional knowledge tradition BPR-literature and the management's stories about organisational change Maintenance workers' pro-active stories about professional/occupational knowledge	Romantic	Constructive
Co-determination literature Studies from critical work sociology	Tragic	Apathetic/Paralysed
Actor-network theory (ANT) BPR literature and the management's stories about today's organisation forms	Satiric	Undermining

In Figure 2 I have developed implications for policy implementation based on my analysis of how various narratives of a controversy such as BPR are met. The romantic story is constructive and thus perhaps the only story which may be used with good effect in bringing about change. The satiric story seems undermining and may be used as an attack in order to undermine the opponent's position. In this way, both the romantic and the satiric may function as community building, even if the effect is dissimilar. The constellation romantic-satiric may be optimal, whether used in a BPR programme by the management or by trade unions who are protecting and encouraging interests of their own members. Thus, we may conclude by suggesting the following question: The successful managers, trade union leaders or consultants will perhaps be those who are experts on switching between satiric and romantic narratives in the controversies accompanying organisational change.

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*Author's address*

Berit Moltu

SINTEF Technology and society, Trondheim, Norway/

Institute for multidisciplinary culture studies, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway.

E-mail: Berit.Moltu@sintef.no