The (un)surprising nature of creativity: A Deleuzian perspective on the temporality of the creative process [*]

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abstract

This paper offers a Deleuzian account of the paradoxical nature of creative surprise in order to explore what this may mean for organisational life. We argue that creativity is capable of yielding *temporal surprise*, which is as much *un*surprising in its emergence through embodied duration, as it is capable of generating surprising new perspectives and experiences. The paper employs two strategies: Firstly, we review the critical literature on creativity to reveal the need to resist certain instrumental approaches, precisely because they cannot meaningfully account for the temporal dimensions of the creative process. Secondly, we reconceptualise what happens in the creative process by offering a Deleuzian analysis of how the temporal-relational dynamic serendipitously, yet (un)surprisingly, generates what seems to be unexpected, un-programmable and unmanageable becomings within and through time. Finally, we suggest that understanding the (un)surprising temporal becomings that are central to creativity, could be helpful in recrafting organisational theories of creativity, as well as informing organisational practice going forward.

Keywords: creative process, creativity, Gilles Deleuze, process philosophy, surprise, temporality

Introduction

Creativity is not a new concept in business and management. During the early 1960s, it was already emerging as a new buzzword in the field, especially in advertising (Frank, 1997) However, from the 1990s, given turbulence and discontinuous change in contemporary

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markets, it has come to be regarded as one of the key factors in the success of organisations (Gogatz and Mondejar, 2005; Proctor, 2005; Williamson, 2001). It has been considered a source of 'superior performance' (Minocha et al., 2014: 137), competitive advantage (Anderson et al., 2014; Zhou and Shalley, 2003), thereby securing the survival of businesses in the long term (Parjanen, 2012). In the age of 'creativity explosion' (Osborne, 2003: 508), 'authors, academics, and consultants have described the benefits of creativity with almost evangelical zeal' (Pech, 2001: 562, also Schlesinger, 2007) such that 'creativity has become the modern mantra' (Jeanes, 2006: 128).

In the mainstream management scholarship and business practice, creativity has not been seen as 'something you just hope to encounter' (Osborne, 2003: 509). Rather, it has been understood as something scholarship can 'purify' and businesses can 'control' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 224). Indeed, Sawyer's desire to witness the development of 'a science of [creativity and] innovation' (2012:33) to predict, prescribe, and generalise how novel and valuable ideas could be generated has been well reflected in the management and organisation studies field that has largely engaged with creativity as another how-to subject as evidenced, for example, in Andriopoulos's (2001), George's (2007), and Anderson et al.'s (2014) highly cited literature reviews covering decades of creativity research in the field.

However, critical voices have pointed out the paradox inherent in this way of thinking. Bilton has traced how various disciplines have attempted to contain what had mostly been seen as un-containable in a 'manageable form', ignoring 'the unpredictability of creative process, people and products' (2010: 255). Jeanes has argued that 'we are seeing an engineering of the creativity … [whereby] we are losing the very ability to be truly creative' (2006: 130). In a similar vein, Osborne (2003: 507) has underlined how 'the compulsory valorisation of the putatively new' has displayed complicity with 'conservative' norms. In our view, these critical voices point to 'the ontological paradox of creativity research', that is, an endeavour to *enclose* what is, by definition, about 'going beyond, exploring that which might be not so obvious and clear-cut and challenging the taken-for-granted … uniqueness from that which existed before' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 222). A whole series of binary oppositions, such as new versus old, original versus conventional, have come to underpin our understanding of creativity, which are in need of being problematised. If not, our capacity to resist a quasi-normative understanding of creativity as naturally better, necessary, and politically neutral is undermined.

Furthermore, we problematise the kind of thinking that constructs management as a given thing or an entity, which can seemingly be either good or bad. As O'Doherty and Ratner remind us, management is a set of 'contingent' practices, 'distributed across humans, standards, mundane technologies and artifacts' (2017: 231). The enactment and maintenance of management entails its making, but also its breaking and remaking, which allows the possibility of the emergence of creativity as an immanent and even constitutive element of organising. The interrogation of the creative process, therefore, also affords us the opportunity to address a tension in theory, i.e., the relationship between mainstream management theory and critical management theory. To view this as a divide is certainly not helpful in rejuvenating management studies, since it makes it impossible to appreciate those creative and critical processes inherent in all management. As O'Doherty and Ratner (2017) argue, there is great potential in unpacking critique as central to management itself. Exploring the ways in which process-thinking allows us to interrogate management's engagement will be part of the contribution that we hope to make towards the end of the paper.

From our perspective, 'thinking creatively about creativity' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 223), and concomitantly, thinking more creatively about management, entails at least two strategies. The first is that of resisting existing conceptualisations and their implications, as Jeanes (2006) has insisted. One may even explore the possibility that creativity has become one of what Alvesson and Blom (2021) call 'hembigs', an acronym for hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts. One may argue that it remains vague and paradoxical, yet ambitiously big in its deployment, and in many ways hegemonic in how it functions, since it seems that being creative has become an imperative that crowds out many other ways of operating. Yet resisting this hegemony is not simple, precisely because creativity resists simplicity. Our second aim, therefore, is to work through what is happening within the creative process, steering clear of the temptation to allow our resistance regarding its instrumental use to swing the pendulum towards extremes, and in the process, becoming what it resists. Resistance and reworking are always part of the ongoing process of organising and dismantling. With these two strategies, this paper aims not only to contribute to the critical perspectives on creativity research but also to the process-oriented studies on creativity in the field of management and organisation studies.

In the first part of the paper, we align ourselves with the critical literature on creativity in order to lend force to resist its instrumentalisation, as we believe that simplistic instrumentalism does not allow for the experimental play of difference that is central to creative flows. Our target is

the way in which the mainstream literature on creativity deals with the notion of the *creative process*, which we think is at the centre of the *enclosure* which critical scholars speak of. We argue that the idea of the creative process is conceptualised in a too straightforward manner. We agree with Driver who noted more than a decade ago that 'research on creativity is typically … not on describing the complexities of the creative process' (2008: 187). As we shall discuss, the creative process is often conceptualised as a stage-based *teleological* path where uncertainty, serendipity or surprise finds little place. Some of our resistance finds its fuel in creativity's capture by neoliberal instrumentality (Yoon et al, 2019). Yet, instrumentality cannot be completely shirked… The work must continue despite the risk of one's analysis performing what it criticises. We do hope to show that thanks to time/timing, we may be afforded that which is timely and appropriate precisely because it is (un)surprising (Holt and Johnsen, 2019).

In the second part of the paper, we approach the creative process through process philosophy, whose application to the creativity research in our field is surprisingly limited (Sonenshein, 2016). And, within the latter temporality is acknowledged to be either absent or considered secondary (Hernes et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2013). We draw upon Deleuze's (1991, 2004) reading of Bergson (1988, 1992, 1998) to explore the serendipitous nature of the creative process to speculate that there is something unorganisable about the creative process that also defies its instrumental deployment. We hold that the creative process is the result of temporal dynamics that brings, unsurprisingly, ideas and interventions that were always-already latently present. It is the idea of time, and timing, that allows for creative transformation, which constitutes not a 'difference to or from', but 'a difference in itself' (Parr, 2010a: 59). As such, it is a creative inheritance which does not lend itself to easy measurement nor chronological, outcomes-driven management, but challenges management to find its critical force in its own processes. The way in which what always continues to emerge as qualitatively multiple, preserves both the delights and the trauma of surprise, unmanageable as these experiences may be. To understand the (un)surprising nature of the creative process, an analysis of its unfolding over time is required. Time is often a luxury that managers do not have; studying phenomena in and over time is a challenge with which management scholars often grapple. As such, both theoretical and practical questions are left unanswered, and it is our task in this paper to delve into these questions.

Resisting the instrumentalisation of the creative process

According to Lubart (2001), the first model of the creative process in the long history of creativity research was developed by Wallas in 1926. By researching how scientists discover, Wallas (1926) offered a four-stage model of the creative process: i) preparation; ii) incubation; iii) illumination; and iv) verification. In brief, Wallas suggested that any creative process, ending up with a creative act, product, and so forth would typically go through four stages: i) a preliminary analysis of a problem; ii) a mental work on the problem; iii) sudden enlightenment or a flash moment when an illuminating idea breaks through the conscious awareness; and iv) evaluating, refining, and developing the idea.

For Sawyer (2012), Guilford's (1950) keynote speech marks the beginning of modern creativity research (see also Chan, 2013). Guilford's keynote was viewed as an important moment in creativity research not because he problematised the 'agreement that the complete creative act involves four important steps' (1950: 451) but because he urged scholars in the creativity field to work more systematically on subprocesses and factors that shape or feed into these commonly agreed stages. Since the 1950s, Lubart (2001) demonstrates, the main concern of wider creativity research has been to refine the stages and analyse subprocesses and factors (micro-meso-macro factors) of the creative process in a more systematic way.

We hold that this has mostly been the case in mainstream management and organisation theory. From the outset, we agree with Bilton (2010) and Chan (2013) that research on creativity has moved from a heroic or person-based model to a complex structural model, integrating organisational, social, cultural, historical and geographical factors into the agenda of creativity research. For example, Amabile (1988, 1996) has integrated organisational components such as material and immaterial organisational resources into her study of individual/small group creativity dynamics. Woodman et al.'s (1993) interactionist perspective has looked at how individual, group, and organisational characteristics interact in the creative process. Some scholars have underlined the importance of and integrated more macro aspects such as cultural and geographical differences, urbanisation, national policies, and so forth into the research agenda (Chiu and Kwan, 2010; Zhou, 2006; Zhou and Su, 2010).

More recently, Fortwengel et al. (2017) have offered practice-based approach to organisational creativity. Practice, defined as the collective and recurring patterns of organisational behaviour, has been understood as a medium-term in the duality of structure and agency. Mobilised by human agents, practices have been argued to be structured by macro entities such as organisational rules, resources and forms. The main argument has been that a certain set of

organisational practices may enhance or constrain the creative process. The priority in studying creativity then becomes analysing and investing in those structural entities that drive human agents to engage in creativity-enhancing practices. For example, the authors refer to the work routines, time constraints, and working-day programmes as some examples of structural elements whose configuration might bring about creativity-enhancing practices (e.g., 'inducing slack and waste (in 3M corporation)') (Fortwengel et al., 2017: 10).

We recognise this substantial theoretical development in the field. Nevertheless, we argue that it has not fundamentally changed the way in which the creative process has been understood and adopted. In general, as Anderson et al.'s (2014) state-of-the-science review demonstrates, each component or factor (from individual to national, from organisational to geographical) has been broken into operationalisable variables to test how they interact with the different stages of the creative process. Indeed, the creative process these studies adopt has essentially remained stage-based, which are not fundamentally different from Wallas' 1926 model, which is also implied by Lubart (2001) in his review of 50 years of creative process research.

For example, Ancelin-Bourguignon et al. (2020) have studied, among others, how art-based literature and management literature approach the creative process (differently). They have acknowledged Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) five-step creativity process as one of the dominating models in the business and management scholarship: i) preparation; ii) incubation; iii) insight; iv) evaluation; v) elaboration. The componential theory of creativity, quite influential in the field, has formulated the creative process as a five-stage process, starting with the 1st-stage of problem identification and ending with the 5th-stage of outcome assessment (Amabile, 2013: 135). We cannot do better than Botella et al.'s (2018) literature review on the existing models of the creative process (the most adopted models), demonstrating that many studies remain committed to identifying the distinct stages of the creative process, thereby solidifying a fragmented, linear approach to time that cannot account for what is always already in the process of becoming.

Our concern is that the idea of the *process* in creativity research seems to 'draw on either life cycle metaphors predicting linear progressions or on teleological models establishing normative step-by-step guides' (Langley et al., 2013: 9). In Chia and King's words, the creative process seems to be construed as 'the simple, linearized and cumulative movement of discrete entities from one definite place to another' (1998: 462). We presume that what prompts management scholars to approach the creative process in this way might be related to the

everlasting ambition in the field to purify and control what is uncontainable (Bilton, 2010). It appears to be a matter of producing a perfect recipe for organisations to serve creative acts. This mode of thinking makes understanding the creative process in a more rigorous sense hardly attainable, for it assumes 'an entitative conception of reality in which clear-cut, definite things are deemed to occupy clear-cut, definite places in space and time' (Chia and King, 1998: 463).

The extant literature shows little sign of interest in ontological questions regarding the creative process. Instead, what we find in most cases are descriptive accounts of the creative process based on a set of unarticulated and unquestioned assumptions. As Hassard (1991) describes it, we have been socialised in complex patterns of temporal structuring and remained hostage to the time disciplines that are entrenched in and through our membership of various forms of social organisation. So, in a very real sense, our understanding of being and becoming within and through time has been disciplined out of us, with important implications for how we would experience and engage with it. Time has been socially constructed in organisations in ways which foreclose our understanding of, and engagement with creative surprises. As Fouweather and Bosma's (2021) account makes clear, codes or order words can either create illusions of fixity, stability, and determination, or, and this is our hope in this paper, it can disrupt such illusions and enact new possibilities. In the next part, we move beyond resisting the existing conceptualisations of creativity, towards articulating what happens in the creative process within and through time/timing.

Doing creative work: *Temporal surprise* as creative-becoming / becoming-creative

We agree with Tsoukas and Chia (2002) according to whom the central assumption of process philosophy is grounded in the notion of becoming. The principle of process, in other words, is that the being of an entity is constituted by its becoming (Whitehead, 1929). As Hernes et al. affirm, 'the fundamental goal of process theorising in organisation studies is to come to grips with organisations as a continuous process of becoming' (2013: 3). This applies to what creativity brings about too. That is, the new cannot be thought of as independent from the creative process which constitutes it, and this process is an interminable and heterogeneous becoming rather than a homogenous and teleological path.

We acknowledge the influence of the deployment of process philosophy in management and organisation studies (Helin et al., 2014; Linstead and Mullarkey, 2003), in which the notion of becoming is positioned as one of the key ontological principles (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 2014,

Whitehead, 1929). Yet, as Sonenshein (2016) acknowledges, even though there are now many studies that apply process philosophy and the notion of becoming to various organisational phenomena, its application to creativity is limited (for exceptions see Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Hjorth et al., 2018; Styhre and Sundgren, 2005). And, within the latter temporality is either absent or considered secondary, and this shortage has been underlined aptly (Hernes et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2013). We argue that *temporality* lies at the heart of process philosophy; that is, if there is something called creative process, it should be grasped as *creative-becoming/becoming-creative*, and temporality is central to this understanding. In what follows, we will revisit the insights of Deleuze (1991, 2004) and his reading of Bergson (1988, 1992, 1998) on temporality to make better sense of the complexity of creative-process-as-becoming and, thereby, offer a conceptual contribution to process-oriented studies on creativity in the field of management and organisation studies.

Multiplying surprise(s) through embodied experimentation

To place Deleuze's thinking about the relationship between agency and temporality in context, and as such, to gauge what this may offer us in terms of understanding creativity, one needs to take account of his sources of inspiration. Parr (2010a) explains that Deleuze combines insights deriving from Bergson's notion of 'creative evolution', with Spinoza's emphasis on the 'body', and Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return'. This rich triad allows us to appreciate the intimacy between creativity and temporality that is essential in appreciating the (un)surprising nature of the creative process. What all of these influences help Deleuze to articulate, is that the way in which our bodies operate in and through time is central to the understanding of how human beings undergo creative transformations. Our embodiment, over time, allows us to experience difference and experiment with what it brings about. And this is precisely where pleasurable surprise(s) may originate.

Life, as a force that persists over time, entails experimental, spontaneous and open processes of transformation. Deleuze (1991) draws inspiration from Bergson's (1998) creative evolution to suggest a system of involution, which moves away from determination or essences that persist over time. Instead, time allows for differences to register themselves within bodies, and it is the experimental interaction between the bodies (human, animate, organic) that generates creative transformations. Drawing on Nietzsche's (1954) conception of the eternal return, Deleuze offers a perspective on how the past always returns to offer us a way to live differently. This entails rejecting passivity or sad passions and opting for active experimentation with our

bodies and their relations to other bodies and entities within particular space-time configurations. Experimentation is about trying out new techniques and methods without a specific end-goal in mind. It consists in experiencing different forces, desires, and powers in different combinations. Yet it is not a kind of anything goes, but rather a proper method, which could even be described as an investigative procedure, like that which one would use to test the quality of a material. It involves the affective experience of disassembling existing relations and connections and assembling new combinations. As such, it does not involve a completely random engagement in embodied experiences, but a particular discipline, which Deleuze (1991), drawing on Bergson (1998, 1992), refers to as philosophical intuition.

Deleuze (1991) explains that Bergson's (1998, 1992) view of intuition is far from being something ineffable or vague. Instead, philosophical intuition operates as a rigorous method, which allows one to become aware of the flowing of temporal experience within oneself. The relationship between duration and the multiple embodied experiences emerging from the past, persisting and emerging in new forms in the present is central to consciousness, and as such, any kind of creativity. Duration allows for the multiplicities to emerge, but some discipline is needed. But not the kind that yields a creative product in a predictable fashion, but rather one that clears the conceptual confusion of false problems away, embraces affective experiences and rigorously tests what bodies are capable of. From this account, we can see that to understand creativity as a laid-back waiting for something new to emerge would be a mistake. It is an active emergence in experiences; an application of philosophical intuition and the embrace of multiplicities that allow something surprising to emerge. In this sense, surprise emerges in time, in and through what our bodies already knew, and are coming to know.

(Re)iteration: The coexistence of past and present

We are well acquainted with the specific conceptualisation of time, the clock-time or linear time, infinitely divisible (i.e., an endless division of instants) and extended (i.e., there is always an instant before/after an instant). Time, from this perspective, is spatialised as a linear, instant-by-instant path. In this view, there exists only *now* as an ideal point or as a 'knife-edge' (Mead, 1932: 171). The past is conceived as no-longer-instants and the future as yet-to-come-instants. Accordingly, 'there is only an ideal point [i.e., living-present]' (May, 2005: 46) as 'the past, present, and future are outside of each other' (Hernes et al., 2013: 3).

Indeed, what appears *real* to us is the living present, for it is all that is given to living perception. However, there exists another dimension of real lying *within and beyond* the state of immediate

perception, namely the past. According to Deleuze (1991: 55), 'the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming'. He writes that:

> The past and present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist… The past does not follow the present, but on the contrary, is presupposed by it as the pure condition without which it would not pass. (Deleuze, 1991: 59)

An account of the ontological past of an individual (including both conscious and unconscious elements), small group or organisation and their temporal interactions are largely absent in the mainstream theorisation of creativity. Each step of the creative process happens in the present and should ideally be repeated in the future from scratch. Let us consider Amabile's recurring example of how a creative idea comes to one:

> Jacobson was relaxing on a beach one day in 1995 when he finished the book he was reading and realised that he had no additional reading material… Jacobson spent the rest of the afternoon coming up with the basic concept of an electronic book. (2013: 137)

The only information we have about Jacobson's whole past is that he graduated from physics. Here, a new idea descends into the mind of a human at the present to solve an immediate problem. From this perspective, the past is absent in the managerial analyses of creativity, aimed at instrumental problem-solving. Its blind spot lies in not acknowledging the multiplicity of the past that remains present in multiple ways and is sucked into whatever creative force emerges.

The creative event is not a spatialised moment in time, but a point of consciousness that pulls in all that exists in various time dimensions towards what can be new and surprising. In (not so) simple terms, every creative present is already past when it is present. Also, the creative future, made present in the creative process, is always already past. Understanding the creative process, therefore, means realising that the new is emerging in the present, as the future, from the past that in a sense we already knew, but yet remains surprising. How this remains possible, is what we explore next.

Differenciation: The virtual and the actual in the creative process

Deleuze (2014) cautions against the mistake of associating possible/real *duality* with the virtual/actual *duo*. Not looking at these concepts carefully may lead to a whole series of misinterpretations about the creative process. We may end up with the idea that what is new, is just a possibility that does not exist but can be made real. This is apparently a common

understanding in the mainstream creativity discourse, that is, creativity is all about producing something that does not exist. The possible/real duality is grounded in the idea that the possible might become real, but as yet has not. Simply, it is based on the mistaken belief that if something has an existence, it is real. If it lacks existence, it is then possible. In addition, whereas there is no doubt that existence or emergence always happens in a specific context in time and space, in the binary thinking of possible/real the real seems entirely abstracted from its context of emergence – as in the case of the emergence of creativity in the reviewed literature.

In virtual/actual duo, the virtual is real as much as the actual, that is, 'the virtual and the actual are two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real' (Boundas, 2006: 5). And 'it is the reality of the virtual that produces existence in its specific context and space and time of emergence' (Grosz, 2000: 227). It is the virtual-past that produces the actual-present. The latter is already in the former. That is, the new, in some form, is already in the realm of virtual-past. This is the process Deleuze (1991, 2014) define through the concept of *differen**c**iation*. Becoming-creative is inscribed in the process of the *differen**c**iation* of virtual-past in something new within the realm of actual-present. While the reviewed literature conceptualises the creative process as the form of a realisation, namely the concretisation of a possibility or a pre-existing plan, we understand it as a form of actualisation, that is 'the opening up of the virtual to what befalls it' (Grosz, 2000: 228).

How can we think of the character of virtual-past that actualises itself in the present? The virtual-past eludes linear causality in the sense of depending on a set of logical cause-and-effect connections or relations among elements. Neither does it involve identification or imitation or resemblance of something already existing or something possible, and as such, it can remain surprising because 'it is difference that characterises the virtual' (May, 2005: 53). And Deleuze argues that the virtual is that which differs with itself and that it 'is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organisation, of heterogeneity, of qualitative discrimination, or of difference in kind; it is a … continuous multiplicity' (1991: 38). The past as being a virtual multiplicity of difference-in-kind actualises itself in a particular set of stable actualities of the present; however, it does not resemble nor gets depleted in what it actualises.

Emergence: Unsurprising surprise

Does creativity, as emerging from the *diffen**c**iation* of the virtual, result in something new in the realm of actual, i.e., a purely surprising, an out-of-the-blue phenomenon? Our answer to

this question is no. Creativity does not descend into the lives of humans or organisations as an external force from outside. It is an immanent event in that it unfolds from the virtual which is always already real and involves things that we have to presuppose for there to be anything actual (Williams, 2011). Yet the (re)iteration of the virtual-past is not completely unsurprising either. The actual-present, the sole dimension of reality which the body perceives in its practical life, does not only encompass, but it also composes and recomposes (through its interaction with the universe) yet-unperceived differences-in-kind that are embedded within and beyond those identities. The actual-present is imbued with the continually *differen**t**iating* multiplicity of virtual differences that are going to *differen**c**iate* themselves in the novel and unfamiliar ways in the future. As such, though creative processes yield surprises, they are not entirely new. The creative future when actualised in the present is also already in the past, i.e., at that point, this future has passed because it is now present. The *diffecen**t**iation* operates in a non-deterministic way, i.e., it, somewhat unsurprisingly, yields a surprising emergence.

In defining the character of future, Deleuze (1983) borrows the idea of the eternal return from Nietzsche (1954) and argues that what faces us in the future is not the return of fixed identities of the present but the return of virtual differences, differences-in-kind, that lie within and beyond those fixed identities. 'The future,' in other words, 'is virtual difference that has not yet actualised itself into a particular present' (May, 2005: 62). In terms of the creative process, new will return to organisations (*return*-in-the-future) in surprising ways. Consequently, as Holt and Hjorth put:

> We should distrust all claims to being, including the claims of fate itself … We are left with what is open. (2014: 212)

The future is open insofar as it can never be brought entirely into one's consciousness in the living present. The future is a hesitation; it is full of uncertainty and unpredictability. It is this insight that leads us to a fundamental reconceptualisation of the creative process.

In describing this process of becoming-creative, we believe that the various questions that we used to compare and contrast perspectives on the creative process no longer function in the way we schematised them before. In fact, if we were to add our conceptualisation of the creative process, it quickly becomes clear that the typical managerial questions of what, how, and why are co-implicated and not so easily distinguishable. In fact, in understanding the process of becoming-creative, we would have to shirk linearity altogether. When describing processes in colloquial terms, it was easier to delineate *why* we engage in it, and *what* we hope

to accomplish, and *how* we go about it, precisely because we envisage a staged route from the problem to the solution. But within the process of becoming-creative, identifying these dimensions are disrupted as they tend to co-emerge. In fact, they may surprise us in terms of what we hoped to find and how it came about.

Discussion: Embracing creative surprise as a (un)surprising process

The managerial preoccupations of mainstream business literature have meant that much of what is written about creativity forecloses the surprises that emerge as it remains preoccupied with instrumental organising, often directed at external capitalist ends. In developing our critique of such approaches, we however inevitably face a paradoxical challenge: if not intended to improve managerial practice, why bother arguing for an alternative conception of creativity anyway? The paradox of having to justify one's critique from an instrumental perspective plagues much of critical management studies. It is especially perplexing since the notion of organisation in itself relies on particular instrumental conceptions – Deleuze suggests that organs exist to keep the organism alive, and as such organisations have some kind of purpose (Linstead and Thanem, 2007: 1486). We therefore fully accept that offering a temporal perspective to creative organising, i.e., working through what is continually becoming in and through creative processes, must in a sense also have its own rewards. But perhaps this kind of purpose has the potential to escape managerial straightjackets, precisely because it emerges as an internal good from within creative practices themselves (MacIntyre, 1981).

One such reward may be gleaned from the way in which a different orientation to time emerges. One might be more patient, more participative, and more tolerant of time-consuming surprise. Our analysis supports Deslandes' (2010) discussion of Mintzberg's critique of traditional time-management. Deslandes argues that Mintzberg's view of strategy echoes Bergson's conception of time as duration in its argument for an integrated, holistic view, rather than a fragmented view of time. In much of the theorising on the creative process, different components and phases are arranged in causal relationships without an acknowledgement of *differences-in-kind*, i.e., the endless heterogeneous multiplicities located in the realm of virtual. In the process, time-consuming surprise seems to be edited out, because they do not fit types, categories, or measurable outcomes. And in most cases, instrumentalised management is just too impatient to allow for too many other possibilities. But to understand and live the multiplicities, emergence in duration is required, as time and timing lies at the heart of how the past registers itself in the new. In a very real sense, the kind of intuition that can appreciate qualitative

multiplicities takes time, perhaps time that managers do not think they have. A Deleuzian account of creative-becomings challenges us to think differently about time and its relationship to the way creativity may function in organisations. Certain challenges facing the planet and humanity make new ways of living and organising urgent. Deleuze insists on thinking beyond the possibilities of capital, towards other ways of becoming. Instead of focusing on the business case for doing so, one may appeal to ecological and epistemological reasons for challenging existing paradigms (Ergene et al., 2021).

A second way in which both critique and the timeous working through of multiplicities seem worthwhile, is the relationship that it offers to an appreciation of precepts and affects beyond rational, cerebral grasps on reality. It is in this regard that a Deleuzian analysis contributes to the interest in intuition that has recently re-emerged in organisation studies. For example, Sadler-Smith's (2016) account extends the discussion of intuition beyond the typical references to Barnard's 'non-logical thinking' and Simon's 'bounded rationality'. By means of a phenomenological analysis that draws on linguistic 'de-nominalisation', Sadler-Smith (2016: 1077) reveals two aspects of intuitive affect, namely 'bodily awareness' (gut reactions/feelings) and 'cognitive awareness' (sense/mental images). We believe that our account of philosophical intuition deepens these insights by offering an account that takes time and timing seriously, both in how bodies are habituated over time, and how mental images are shaped over time. Mintzberg's conceptualisation of strategy that is more reliant on intuition than on the process of compiling systematic data highlights the implications this has for organising (Deslandes, 2010). From this perspective, strategists become 'intuitive continuationalists' (Deslandes, 2010: 13). Where Sadler-Smith's (2016) linguistic analysis reveals that the process of intuition is often described as being fast or automatic, our analysis would explain that the perceived speed of this process may mask the time involved in preparing this response. In a very real sense, allowing for intuition may indeed save time, because it can potentially distil extensive pasts into surprising moments. And then again, it may waste time in the most pleasurable way(s).

It is important to reiterate that from a Deleuzian perspective, Bergson's philosophical intuition does not refer to a sort of metaphysical contemplation. Instead, it is a rigorous process of attending to embodied cues, testing one's emerging insights regarding a situation, product, or opportunity through time. Bergson (1988) uses the example of a lump of sugar. When a lump of sugar is put into a glass of water, it dissolves in time and 'that shows how this sugar differs *in kind* not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself' (Deleuze, 1991: 32). This

example enables us to recognise that a particular creativity antecedent is not merely different from other antecedents *in degree* (often measured quantitatively in a particular space and time), but it also becomes different from them and itself *in kind* when it interacts with other antecedents in a complex way and creates a multiplicity. In thinking through the invention of the electronic book, to revisit Amabile's Jacobson example, the idea of the book comes to differ also from itself. That is, it challenges us to experience the object called book in radically new ways, while at the same time engaging us in practices of reading that continues in and through these changes. Or to take another example, an antecedent like intrinsic motivation may differ in kind from other types of motivation, but also manifests differently over time. This requires researchers to avoid labelling it in a way that cannot accommodate its inherent multiplicity. Nor can it be nearly dichotomised from extrinsic motivation, which also differs from itself over time. It also makes it important to allow an understanding of antecedents to be understood over time and in time, rather than by means of snapshots of episodes, or of specific products or ideas. Differences in kind only become intelligible when we experience these multiplicities through embodied experimentation over time.

From a research perspective, our wager would be that it is best to avoid typical modes of measurement and units of assessment to products and results that may be ill-suited to studying the creative process as a temporal phenomenon. Valuing creativity in terms of its contribution to capital and capitalism's pursuit of the new, limits our ability to consider other forms of valuation, and new possibilities of becoming. Developing post-Covid ways of working and organising could benefit from the experiments that emerged as the virus forced us into new becomings. Some of this have yielded new insights and new ways of being. However, harvesting these learnings whilst acknowledging that not all of this is necessary good, will be part of the process. This also means acknowledging the dark side of creativity, i.e., the ways in which capitalism capitalises on the decoding of traditional social codes and recoding it to enable new forms of commodification (Jeanes, 2006). The dark side of creativity is often only visible over time. Methodologically, this requires systematic work on exploring 'the relations and affects that have shaped creative production contemporaneously and historically, to make sense of the dynamics of production and the processes that shape creativity over time' (Fox, 2015: 533). To address the complexity of the creativity phenomenon, longitudinal qualitative research (e.g. Styhre and Sundgren, 2005) may be accompanied, for example, with mathematical modelling, logical compound synthesis and statistical analysis of large databases collected over time.

Our reading of temporal aspects of the process as becoming extends and deepens insights into the limitations that linear conceptions of time may have for understanding something like responsible innovation (Blok, 2019). Instead of looking backwards or forward in determining what responsible innovation may mean, an ethos of responsive innovation requires immersion and action and emergence in duration, which may yield a more meaningful understanding of sustainable innovation. Or as Painter-Morland (2012) argued in her Deleuzian reframing of responsibility, it is not so much being responsible *for* what occurred in the past or what may lie ahead, but an ongoing responsiveness *towards* others and the environment. This capacity to give a response, in time, towards particular others may entail stronger relational constraints by which new scientific discoveries can be guided (Pérezts et al., 2020).

In this way, the agency is reconfigured in and through time. We become, as agents, in and through our ongoing experimentations in responding, as a response to our relatedness at specific moments. In terms of addressing the challenges relating to the unit of explanation, causal relationships and the nature of causes, our emphasis on the temporal dimensions could potentially contribute to 'entrepreneurship as process' (McMullen and Dimov, 2013) by not simply looking forward, or backward (as is the case in strategy research) but by acknowledging each strategic conversation as the exploration of the past that is registering as new. In this way, management always reinvents itself through its critical engagement with the past, and what it is always already becoming.

In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari (1999:19) explained in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, the idea of 'deterritorialising', which can be described as decoding or dismantling of existing practices and patterns, is central to capitalism's growth, and as such part of managing organisations. The challenge, however, is how to maintain the always creative tension between capitalism tendency to reterritorialise the flow of energies into axioms (Parr, 2010b: 71), as such arresting and containing it, and the need to remain open to ongoing experimentation through ongoing differen*c*iation. From our perspective, it is perhaps precisely the role of critique to maintain this tension. Creative surprises open the possibility that what emerges is questioned, interrogated, evaluated, and as such requires that critique remains central to any form of management. Time, and timing, are key in this process.

Our analysis, therefore, offers insights in refining insights around organisational memory, potentially informing discussions around the interaction between 'procedural' and 'declarative' memory (Kyriakopoulos and de Ruyter, 2004). In terms of debates around whether the creative

process is more individual or more collaborative (Elsbach and Flynn, 2013), we believe that our discussion may expose this framing as a false binary. From a temporal perspective, that which resides in the bodies of individuals is always already the result of past collaborations – specific to the individual but never capable of registering without some form of interaction with other bodies (human or non-human, material or immaterial).

Our account gestures beyond the preoccupation with talent management, which identifies creatives to employ as a resource. Firstly, we argue that human agents contribute but are not more central to the creative process than all the other co-contaminating factors. Yet, precisely because of the creative process relationship with distant pasts and futures it is somewhat unsurprisingly productive, and managers are themselves the embodied residues of these temporal dimensions. Instead of managing such processes, the manager may be managed by it. Embracing and exploring this in itself is creative in a way that may disrupt the somewhat unhelpful distinction between the suits and the creatives that often persists in organisations. Our understanding of the process of becoming-creative, disrupts neat identifications and undermines the simplistic managerial orientation that informs it. The implication of our study is that while creativity is the emergence of something surprising, unexpected, and different, these experiences in fact always existed in the virtual realm, that is, the ontological past. The past is a crucial part of the emergence of any creative present, but perhaps not in the way that a managerial approach to creativity can appreciate. The reason may be that the ways in which componential theories (Amabile, 1988, 1996, 2013) conceptualise the units, stages, practices and the interactions between them, thoroughly disrupts the basic idea of the process ontology as embracing unpredictable flows of experience. The way in which the how, why, what, as well as the results of processes of becoming-creative are interwoven and co-emergent, is something that is very difficult to understand if one seeks to find generalisable managerial tools to make the creative process replicable.

The difficulty in understanding the limitations of managerialism may also relate to the fact that management scholars sometimes tend to rush to conclusions, i.e., they do not always take the time to look for blind spots in their ontological assumptions. The reason why the co-emergent process of becoming-creative has not been meaningfully conceptualised, is because the temporality of the creative process has not been studied thoroughly. The challenge of finding time to attend to time, however, remains a paradoxical problem faced by both theorists and practitioners alike, and presents multiple epistemological challenges as well. To address these, taking account of temporal dimensions could help one avoid the trap of binary logics, or as

Fouweather and Bosma (2021) describe it, resist the power of OR in and through participation in the process, and most importantly, in speaking and acting differently.

Focusing on the temporal dimensions of the creative process helps us address the paradoxical challenge of managing to live with the timing(s) of multiple, unmanageable, temporal surprise(s). In terms of the broader literature on paradox, our account offers very specific illustrations of how paradoxes of organising, especially the tensions inherent in learning-organising, performing-organising, and even belonging-organising (Smith and Lewis, 2011), play out in the creative process. The paradox that we deal with, is the more nuanced interconnectedness between *what was* and organisational attachments to these pasts, and the embracement of *what is becoming* precisely because of the engagement with these pasts. Within the creative process, one has to deliver on existing expectations, i.e., continue to perform as a member of organisational structures while, at the same time, learn and critically question what one is part of (i.e., belonging while individualising).

Conclusion

Even though a central part of our analysis resists the simplistic instrumentalism at the heart of managerial discourses, we also do not believe that one can ever be completely rid of it. The (un)surprising process of creative emergence, what is experimentally and playfully discovered pulls its force as much from past successes as it does from failures. Pleasure and pain are the mixed results of what emerges, as is useful and useless novelty, helpful and harmful invention. Being mindfully part of the process of becoming may be the kind of strategy that could allow us to resist the power of 'OR', but only if one can make peace with what unfolds over time, and in time (Chia and Holt, 2009; Fouweather and Bosma, 2021). What is needed instead is an openness towards experimental playfulness, explored from who and what we are always already becoming.

The embracement of our material intuitions also means being much more comfortable in our skins, and an understanding of what this implies for any form of agency, whether that may be creative agency, strategic agency, or managerial agency. We argue, in other words, that creative surprise does not denote a kind of break with our embodied past, as a moment of an unbridled individual or a collective brilliance, or disruption. At the same time, however, the creative process indeed involves some unexpected, unprogrammable and unmanageable emergence. The challenge is to respond meaningfully to this paradox of continuity and change, which Hernes and Irgens (2013) so clearly described in terms of organisational life, but yet has to

register in how we think about creative agency, but also about how we respond to the challenges of change and continuity in everyday (organisational) life. In a world radically transformed by the power of a virus, our philosophical analysis may yield some insights regarding ways of living and working in times of unprecedented change.

And then, we do believe that being creative remains hard work. It is by no means about waiting for the new and useful to miraculously occur. Instead, it involves putting the body in play, applying the mind, i.e., the embodied mind, to identify those false problems that block the emergence of the new and useful, and experimenting with disabling and reassembling the forces, desires and capacities that pulse through the body as new combinations are explored. We therefore tentatively conclude with a paradoxical answer to the question: Is the creative process surprising and therefore unmanageable? Yes, it is the ultimate surprise inasmuch as it cannot be anticipated, directed, or managed in the strictest sense(s) of the word(s). But the answer is simultaneously no, inasmuch as creativity is the residue of all the multiplicities that already exist within the past, waiting to register themselves, (un)surprisingly, as something that our bodies already *knew*. And this is perhaps troubling, as much as it is reassuring … but only time will tell.

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