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The organization's synaptic mode of existence

how a hospital merger is many things at once

Bencherki, Nicolas; Elmholdt, Kasper Trolle

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 Organization

The organization's synaptic mode of existence

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Abstract:	<p>Different perspectives on organizations have alternatively sorted them on the side of the social / human / linguistic or that of the material / non-human / technical, reducing the question of what an organization may be to attempts to (re)connect these two realms. Literature adopting a relational view, however, has offered a way out of this opposition, by embracing the multiplicity of beings that may make up organizations. We extend this approach by engaging with French philosopher Étienne Souriau's discussion of modes of existence to suggest that organizations are 'synaptic', which means they exist in the passages between modes, as they articulate the actions of entities existing under different modalities. This work of articulation amounts to that of organizing, where communication is the toil of passing from one mode to the other. Viewing organizations as synaptic may recognize not only ontic pluralism, but also existential pluralism in organizations. By doing so, our study contributes to relational understandings of what organizing means and provides a sensitivity to the politics involved in deciding who or what may exist within organizations.</p>

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The organization’s synaptic mode of existence: How a hospital merger is many things at once

For Peer Review

ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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Abstract

Different perspectives on organizations have alternatively sorted them on the side of the social / human / linguistic or that of the material / non-human / technical, reducing the question of what an organization may be to attempts to (re)connect these two realms. Literature adopting a relational view, however, has offered a way out of this opposition, by embracing the multiplicity of beings that may make up organizations. We extend this approach by engaging with French philosopher Étienne Souriau's discussion of modes of existence to suggest that organizations are 'synaptic', which means they exist in the passages between modes, as they articulate the actions of entities existing under different modalities. By analyzing the case of a hospital merger in Denmark, we show that this work of articulation amounts to organizing, and that viewing organizations as synaptic recognizes not only their ontic pluralism, but also their existential pluralism. By doing so, our study contributes to relational understandings of what organizing means and provides a sensitivity to the politics involved in deciding who or what may exist within organizations.

Keywords: Étienne Souriau; modes of existence; organizational ontology; multiplicity; merger.

Introduction

How does an organization exist? In answering this question, literature has suggested that “organizations are many things at once” (Morgan, 1986: 337), which, however, raises a new question: how to detect the many beings and things that jointly make up the organization, and especially interactions between them? Attempts to answer such questions have led organization scholars to draw attention either to people’s *understanding* of these many elements (Martin, 2001; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983), thus locating the organization on the side of meanings, language and culture that people produce together and that guide their interactions with others and their collective. Alternatively, attention has been drawn to the material facet of organizations, including bodies, technologies and space (Ashcraft, 2008; Bansal & Knox-Hayes, 2013; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; Leonardi, 2012).

These two poles – to which we can refer as the social and the material, or the human and the non-human – have been theorized as being in a dialectical tension (Putnam, 2015). While studies adopting either perspective have the merit of expanding our views of organizations to include more than just human beings, they only recognize two possible keys to the organizational equation. Organizations thus often continue to be considered as social entities whose relationship with materiality is the intriguing problem: each pole “stands for itself, by itself, and has to be (causally) re-linked, which takes a major theoretical effort” (Weik, 2011: 658). Indeed, despite acknowledging that materiality is integral to organizational life, research still deploys much effort attempting to theorize the connection between the social and the material within organizations, especially under the rubric of sociomateriality (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Scott & Orlikowski, 2013), and still considers them as only two realms whose “entanglement” must be explained (Orlikowski, 2007). These proposals invite us to rethink the relationship between “the social and

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3 the material" (Dale, 2005: 655), but restrain from "radically questioning this dualism" (Lorino,
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5 2018: 51). As such, these proposals, on the one hand, reproduce, perhaps unwantedly, an artificial
6
7 "bifurcation of nature" into a social and a material realm (Cooren, 2015) and, on the other hand,
8
9 implicitly take for granted that organizations are first and foremost "social" in nature, thus making
10
11 their connection with materiality a secondary problem rather than a core ontological consideration.
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16 Some authors have suggested that "[m]aterials – and so realities [...] do not exist in and of
17
18 themselves" (Law, 2004: 42), and, as we will argue, exist thanks to the assistance of multiple modes
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20 of existence, which cannot be reduced to the social or material. This view is consistent with the
21
22 recognition that organizations emerge from *relations* that are established between or through
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24 entities, irrespective of their nature, as "each implies the other so that they exist in a relationship
25
26 of *betweenness* rather than as separate terms" (Cooper, 2005a). In other words, rather than define
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28 organizations as a collection of material and social items, we should look for it in the interstices
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30 (Debaise, 2013) and embrace their "monstrous" (Thanem, 2006) and "inhuman" nature (Hietanen,
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32 Andéhn & Wickström, 2019).
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36
37 Considering organizations as the outcome of relations raises the question of what the "act
38
39 of relating" may concretely look like (Cooper, 2005a: 1689). We must ask why and how beings
40
41 reach out to others, desire them, and how their encounters in turn give rise to new beings (Linstead
42
43 & Brewis, 2007). In order to answer this question and extend the relational view on organization,
44
45 we turn to the philosophy of modes of existence as it was formulated by Etienne Souriau. The
46
47 French philosopher has had an important influence on actor-network theory, in particular on the
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49 writings of Bruno Latour (1986, 2011), and can be seen as the precursor to ANT's suggestion to
50
51 observe the "work of connection and collection" among heterogeneous beings (Latour, 2005).
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54 However, studies in organizational studies adopting actor-network have yet to fully explore the
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3 notion of modes of existence, which was only explicitly acknowledged by Latour (2013a) later in
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5 his career.
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8 Building on this, we may say that current organizational research readily recognizes *ontic*
9
10 *pluralism*—the existence of multiple beings in organizations—but has yet to explore *existential*
11
12 *pluralism*—the idea that each being exists under multiple modes at once (see Souriau, 2015: 99).

13 Organizing, then, consists in helping each being move from one mode to another. As we will
14
15 suggest, though, returning to Souriau's own work allows us to specify the organization's mode of
16
17 existence as *articulating* between other modes. Of particular interest to us, Souriau (2015)
18
19 suggested that one of these modes is the 'synaptic,' which describes that which exists as an
20
21 articulation mechanism for other modes. The notion of articulation refers to the toil of finding out
22
23 how one being's actions may continue into another, which may exist under another mode, and
24
25 therefore provide it *more* existence. For instance, a research lab may exist as a room on a campus,
26
27 as a line on the university's budget, as an annual workshop it organizes, as an administrative unit
28
29 in the organizational chart, etc. All of these modes are articulated, say, on the lab's website and in
30
31 its annual report, where passages between physical space, money, events and bureaucracy are made
32
33 explicit and shown to support its existence. This articulation is not intrinsically good or bad. For
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35 instance, while it may be "good" from the perspective of a being that now exists through more
36
37 ways, it may also interrupt or interfere with some other being's existence – for example, the same
38
39 budget for the research lab was perhaps coveted by a fellow professor, whose projects and existence
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41 as a researcher may not find their way into other modes of existence, and therefore not materialize.
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43 In this paper, we will expand on this notion of a synaptic mode of existence to show that it
44
45 corresponds to organizational reality. Indeed, organizations exist as a connection hub for other
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47 modes of existence, including people, buildings, artefacts, abstractions and budgets. We suggest
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 that paying attention to how the synaptic mode deploys in empirical settings may help answer the
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5 question: “how can an organization be many things at once?”
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8 We respond to this question by reviewing current theorizing of organizations as comprising
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10 entities of several natures, we consider how these different entities may co-exist and how synaptic
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12 passages can be conceived between them. Using empirical data from our ethnographic observation
13
14 of two consultants helping a department through a hospital merger in Denmark, we show that
15
16 synaptic articulation between modes of existence may be concretely observed when buildings,
17
18 numbers and abstractions take up each other. Consultants often act at the crossroads of various
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20 forms of knowledge, materials, groups and tasks and making these different beings converge and
21
22 the merger situation vividly showed this (see Bourgoin & Muniesa, 2016). This analysis allows us
23
24 to develop an analytical apparatus that not only accounts for the many “things” that make up
25
26 organizational life—which corresponds to ontic pluralism, as in the case of several existing
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28 theoretical proposals—but also highlights that each being exists in many ways and that
29
30 organizations exist precisely as the articulation of those many modes of existence—which
31
32 corresponds to existential pluralism. This allows us to recognize that diversity is not only the
33
34 collection of different people and things within organizations, but rather that diversity is their
35
36 defining feature and that the more or less harmonious interaction of existentially diverse entities *is*
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38 organizing. We can therefore specify current literature’s general recognition of the organization’s
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40 “hybridity” (e.g., Castor & Cooren, 2006), which advance our understanding of what organization
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42 are and mean, the politics they implicate, and how to study them.
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51 **The social, material and relational ontologies of organization**

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53 What an organization is has been a key concern for decades and different proposals have been
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55 formulated in that sense. Yet, Taylor and Van Every’s (2000: x) finding, that “the closer one looks
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3 at literature on organization the less evident the answer to the question becomes," still seems to
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5 hold true (see du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016: 2). Indeed, it seems difficult for organizational scholars
6
7 to move past habitual forms of theorizing. For instance, over sixty years ago, March and Simon
8
9 (1958) already argued that "snatches of organization theory" could be "assembled from a wide
10
11 range of sources", but when they tentatively defined organizations, they still reduced them to
12
13 "assemblages of interacting human beings" (1958: 4). Focusing solely on human beings, we argue,
14
15 provides a limited view of how organizing take place. While they admit that organizations comprise
16
17 more than just human beings, scholars exploring the articulation of organizations diverse nature
18
19 have tended to prioritize either the social or the material pole. Alternatively, some have taken up
20
21 the question differently, and have embraced a relational ontology (e.g., Cooper, 2005b; Kuhn,
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23 Ashcraft & Cooren, 2017; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh,).

The social and the material as prisms into organizational multiplicity

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31 A key answer as to the way organizations could articulate elements of a different nature has come
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33 from the "interpretive turn" (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Putnam & Pacanowsky,
34
35 1983). This orientation has proposed that organizational reality is shaped by the shared
36
37 understandings individuals produce together. Grasping the relationships between the elements
38
39 making up the organization, then, equates to grasping our understandings of them, thus making
40
41 them largely a matter of human interaction and sociality. What elements become salient, how these
42
43 elements are connected to each other, and what sort of organization emerges from those relations,
44
45 may not so much be dependent on the "truth" of the organization, as on the metaphors we use to
46
47 understand it (Schoeneborn, Vasquez & Cornelissen, 2016; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987; Morgan,
48
49 1986). These understandings can be shared using "sensegiving" devices (Corvellec & Risberg,
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51 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), including narratives (Boje, 2003), visual tools (de Vaujany &
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 Vaast, 2016), meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013) and other
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5 opportunities for sensemaking (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Wright, 2005). What is shared on those
6
7 occasions, therefore, is not only one meaning or another, but also a particular way of weaving
8
9 elements of reality together, which sediment into a culture (Martin, 2001; Schein, 1996). Shared
10
11 interpretations, then, play a part in the way that people collectively engage with these elements and
12
13 integrate them into their sociability, in agreement with Weick's (1995) insight that sensemaking
14
15 and organizing are related processes.
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20 As an alternative to considering the organization as existing in people's understanding of
21
22 relations between elements, some authors have also drawn attention to the part that technology,
23
24 artifacts and other physical elements play in organizations. While most attention in that line of
25
26 thinking was dedicated to technology (Leonardi, 2012; Faraj & Azad, 2012), some authors have
27
28 also considered how bodies – gendered, ageing, and variously abled – participate in the constitution
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30 of organizations (Ashcraft, 2008; Trethewey, 1999). Others have studied the contribution of
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32 architecture and space (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, et al., 2008; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; de
33
34 Vaujany & Vaast, 2016), as well as that of tools and equipment (Anteby, 2008). These authors
35
36 insist on the important role of materiality in establishing organization. For instance, Kornberger
37
38 and Clegg (2004) stress how architecture is characterized by concrete generative spatial
39
40 arrangements that order social organization (see also Cnossen & Bencherki, 2018). Attention has
41
42 also been drawn to the properties of technology that allow it to transcend space and time,
43
44 collectively designated as its *materiality* (Leonardi, 2012). Researchers concerned with the relation
45
46 between individuals and technology tend to either suppose that one pole can be reduced to the
47
48 other, or to consider that one pole controls the other, as either social or technological determinism
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50 (Leonardi & Barley, 2008). For instance, materiality's role in organizing may be seen as socially
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3 constructed, thus tilting to the side of social determinism (Leonardi & Barley, 2010), or human
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5 behavior may be understood as constrained by material structures, which “require users to cope
6
7 with the things that they perceive it can and cannot control them to do” (Leonardi, Bailey & Pierce,
8
9 2019: 668). Indeed, whether one pole has precedence over the other raises the question of control,
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11 since, as Dale (2005: 651) notes, organizational control is a “combined social and material
12
13 construction.”
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18 However, while a good proportion of research is concerned with disentangling the part the
19
20 social and the material respectively play in their encounter, the studies focusing on linking the
21
22 social or the material restrain from rethinking the dualism of the relationship between the two. In
23
24 response, authors have pointed out that the relationship may also be viewed “via a relational
25
26 ontology focused on constitutive entanglement” (Faraj & Azad, 2012: 249). Overemphasizing the
27
28 social realm would indeed “cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity” (Barad, 2003: 810), and
29
30 the opposite is also true. There is therefore a need to make the familiar categories of the social and
31
32 material strange again to discover that they are themselves already made up of many *things* (Beyes
33
34 & Steyaert, 2013).
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Starting in-between things: relationality

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41 While much empirical work proposing to take a “relational” stance has in fact used this term to
42
43 refer to relationships between human individuals (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Montanari, Scapolan &
44
45 Gianecchini, 2016), some studies use the term in a stronger sense. These studies, rather than
46
47 reducing organizations to one type of being, refute that there was ever a “bifurcation of nature”
48
49 (Whitehead, 1920), and suggest that registering the many beings that populate society and
50
51 organizations is more complex than it appears. Humans are social beings but they are also natural
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53 to begin with (Rosset, 1973) and any attempt to “purify” the social and the material into neat realms
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3 is a fabrication (Latour, 1993). More than duality, we must think in terms of multiplicity (Linstead
4 & Thanem, 2007; Styhre, 2002). Organizations are monstrosities given that they exist as multiple
5
6 things at once and always exceed attempts to reduce them to any simple categorization (Thanem,
7
8 2006). Even the human self is punctuated with breaks and discontinuities, rather than being a
9
10 homogeneous and coherent material (Driver, 2014). Otherness constantly encroaches on efforts to
11
12 define organizations and subverts them from the inside (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1999).
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14 Organizations are also monstrous as they may fail to record or even permit the existence of others,
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16 for instance because their numerical or bureaucratic practices may limit the forms by which beings
17
18 can account for themselves (Munro, 2001).
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25 From the moment we acknowledge that organizations exist not only *with* other beings, but
26
27 *through* them, the question is raised as to how beings engage in relations with each other to
28
29 constitute organizational assemblages. Scholars attempting to answer this question have adopted a
30
31 relational ontology to understand how people and events or things relate to constitute organizations
32
33 (Cooper, 2005b; Munro & Jordan, 2013) as well as abstractions such as authority (Bourgoin,
34
35 Bencherki & Faraj, 2019) and resistance (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2019). This question has been
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37 particularly posed in terms of desire, which is not so much a want for something lacking, as if each
38
39 component being was incomplete without others. Instead, desire is an autonomous process, an urge,
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41 towards no particular object (Linstead & Brewis, 2007). This appetitive movement could be better
42
43 described as a thirst for more existence, aiming for its own proliferation and trying to reach it by
44
45 connecting to other, similarly oriented processes (Hietanen, Andéhn & Wickström, 2019). A
46
47 relational stance stresses the *in-between*, thereby challenging the common understanding of
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49 organization in terms of the categories of the social and the material, and encouraging a sensitivity
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51 to the *act* of relating or connecting a multiplicity of beings (Cooper, 2005: 1689).
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To further elaborate this strong version of the argument, we turn to French philosopher Etienne Souriau (2015, originally published in 1943). Souriau suggested that any given thing exists in many different ways at once, which he refers to as modes of existence. For him, existence itself is a matter of degree, depending on how many modes take up the thing's action. An important element of Souriau's theory is that one of the modes he identifies is what he refers to as the "synaptic" mode, which corresponds to that which exists inasmuch as it allows passage between other modes of existence. It is, in a sense, a mode which articulates other modes, and which as such combines elements of what we understand as relationality with aspects of organizing.

Finding 'passages' between modes of existence

The notion of modes of existence finds its roots in Spinoza's (1994) *Ethics*, where the Dutch thinker suggests that reality is made up of a single substance expressed through different "modes." These modes correspond to "that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself" (Spinoza, 1994: 1), pointing to the fact that existence must be continued through uptake in other beings. In other words, to exist, a being must find others that can continue its action through their own, taking it up and continuing it; hence, existence is inherently relational. For instance, a person exists physically as matter in space, biologically as flesh and blood, but also politically as a citizen, fictionally as a character in their friend's short story, legally as a party to a contract, and so forth. This entails that the social and the material are not the only two modes of existence. Most importantly, the relation between modes of existence is not external, as if something existing under one mode tried to get in touch with something existing under another mode, but rather internal: the very existence of one being depends on its ability to continue its existence otherwise.

Souriau's notion of modes of existence, including the synaptic, makes it possible to devise an empirically viable approach to the study of how elements existing under diverse modes of

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3 existence may play a crucial part in constituting organizational reality. It allows extending current
4
5 understandings of relationality and materiality by recognizing that the organization lies in the
6
7 articulation between modes of existence. That articulation is not abstract but relies each time on a
8
9 concrete mode of existence that provisionally plays the part of an articulating 'meta-mode.'

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13 Thinking in terms of synapses highlights the importance of considering organizations at the
14
15 intersection of several modes of existence. As Souriau (2015: 182) unequivocally states regarding
16
17 modes of existence, "considering one as having priority over the rest, is therefore a gross mistake
18
19 and an abyss of error." Instead, existence must be understood in the conjunction between modes.
20
21 Souriau lists "intensive" modes of existence (degrees, levels, distances, etc.) and specific modes
22
23 (phenomenon, thing, identity, universals, psychical, solitudinary, virtual, etc.), and notes that they
24
25 transition into one another and that a being is always scattered across modes. This means that any
26
27 being exists through the actions of others. That is why, as Latour (2005: 24) notes when
28
29 commenting on Souriau's notion of modes of existence, the term is "clearly linked to the expression
30
31 of alternative ontologies" since most beings exist *as* many others, and may be said to exist
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33 politically, legally, economically, etc., depending on who or what continues their action.
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39 Those crossings are made possible by the *synaptic* mode, which may take a different
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41 empirical form depending on the situation – for instance, how a biological being becomes a
42
43 fictional character depends on the apparatuses of writing and publishing. A synapse is defined by
44
45 its function: 'the very nature of a synapse is to "bring together"' (Stengers & Latour, 2015: 72). In
46
47 the same way as a synapse, the junction of two nerve cells, is where an electrical signal becomes a
48
49 chemical one and back again, the synaptic mode of existence ensures that the action that takes place
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51 under one mode continues on under another one, although it also expresses itself fully in each one
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53 of them. As he explains, "Existence is all the existences, it is each mode of existing [...] it is cloven
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3 in and through its modal diversity [... it] resides and accomplishes itself integrally in them all, in
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5 each taken on its own" (Souriau, 2015: 187).
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8 In that sense, synaptic existence is not merely the addition of modes of existence. Indeed,
9
10 for Souriau, modes of existence do not simply co-exist, but also support each other's existence as
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12 they take it up and continue it. He refers to the synaptic mode of existence as the 'anaphoric' mode,
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14 referring to the anaphora, the stylistic device that consists in emphasizing an idea by repeating the
15
16 same group of words. To exist, then, is also to be repeated, like an anaphora, through the same or
17
18 through different modes of existence, as an author exists as a body, as a name on the cover of her
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20 books, as a character in a literary critic's work, and so forth, while always maintaining some
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22 recognizable equivalence through those repetitions. For clarity, we will from now on simplify this
23
24 vocabulary by speaking of one mode 'taking up' the other and of 'uptakes' and 'passages.'
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30 We therefore propose that organizational existence involves a form of uptake of one mode
31
32 into the next, an uptake that corresponds to the synaptic mode. To understand organizations, we
33
34 must understand how to move from one mode to the next and recognize that each being participates
35
36 in the constitution of the organization's common reality because "the part hopes for existence
37
38 together, it hungers after a different mode; it wants to be transposed into that mode" (Souriau, 2015:
39
40 188). This hunger is a driver for existence, as the different modes, as feeble as they may be, "are
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42 then 'calling us' because they need to be sustained to get 'more' existence" (Hennion, 2017: 78).
43
44 Indeed, Stengers and Latour (2015) note, in their presentation of Souriau, that he redefines the
45
46 notion of intention or desire: the driving force is not so much the volition to do one thing or another,
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48 but rather the appetitive movement towards the Other as an outlet to continue one's own existence
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50 (see also Debaise, 2008; Thanem, 2004). In that sense, the synaptic mode does not correspond to a
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 collection of beings existing under different modes (this would be ontic pluralism), but to entities
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5 that exist to the extent that they facilitate, channel or guide other existences' appetitions.
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8 The organization's existence as a synapse can be observed in the work of articulation
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10 between modes of existence and their appetitions. This work, in its turn, is observable because it is
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12 rooted in action, in the "what is done," which is itself the true existent' (Souriau, 2015: 176). This
13
14 action-based view of existence means that 'the event becomes the true substance, and the
15
16 connection between all beings becomes exclusively transitive and situated or constituted in the
17
18 action itself, and according to its mode' (p. 178). This action is therefore the action of passing, of
19
20 moving from one mode to the next, and of preserving a form of agentive equivalence through those
21
22 modal changes. It also means, and perhaps especially in organizational contexts, that equivalences
23
24 may be contested, as the 'threshold of identity' may not be agreed upon. Furthermore, some of
25
26 these passages are reversible, but others not so, which means that passing from one mode to the
27
28 other also shapes existence in a more or less durable way (Callon, 1991).
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34 Such passages between modes are not rare, esoteric occurrences. On the contrary, they are
35
36 routine accomplishments that allow us, human beings, to embrace the richness and complexity of
37
38 the world. They are at the heart of what we usually mean by the term communication. Indeed,
39
40 communication is not only about human's use of language, but also the transformation and transfer
41
42 of action from one being to the next. Communication, therefore, also takes place when a movement
43
44 of the foot on a pedal ultimately leads to the car moving faster (Bencherki, 2016; Cooren, 2015).
45
46 This more generous definition of communication allows accounting not only for transactions
47
48 between individuals exchanging signs, but for all acts by which action is moved from one entity to
49
50 the next, irrespective of their mode of existence. Insisting on the way communication performs an
51
52 assemblage or arrangement of beings and articulates action among them shows that the synaptic
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 mode of existence is at least as common and as constitutive of organizational reality as
4
5 communication is. It also gives a hint as to the sort of empirical phenomena we may be interested
6
7 in observing to look for modes of existence and their articulation: we must look for how modes of
8
9 existence can 'speak' to each other to convey action (Bencherki, 2017; Bencherki & Iliadis, 2019).
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Research setting: Preparing to merge

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15 The importance of passages between modes of existence and the notion that the organization
16
17 consists in the articulation of those passages emerged while we studied a hospital merger in
18
19 Denmark. This merger consisted of several hospitals combining into a single large public university
20
21 hospital. As part of preparing for the merger, a leadership development initiative took shape where
22
23 consultants from the hospital's HR consultancy unit, in collaboration with external counterparts,
24
25 were assigned by the hospital top management to coach department managers and leaders through
26
27 the merger process, and to encourage cross-departmental collaboration to improve continuity of
28
29 care. In this article, we narrow our focus to a specific medical department, which we call
30
31 department H. This department was to merge three geographical sites into a single one over the
32
33 following three to four years, and the goal was to reduce the number of patient beds by 20%, by
34
35 treating more cases on an outpatient basis. Like the rest of the hospital, department H was preparing
36
37 for the merger while also facing broader challenges, such as an aging population and fast-paced
38
39 technological change. At department H, the consultants' role became both to help implement the
40
41 strategic initiative that followed the mandate entrusted to them by the hospital's top management,
42
43 moreover, to assist the local team at department H in preparing for the merger and transform the
44
45 initiative to fit the department's own reality.
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53 Our observations at department H spanned from spring 2013 to summer 2014. The material
54
55 we collected consisted of about 200 hours of observation, including a number of informal
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 conversations or ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979), as well as 37 formal semi-structured
4
5 interviews. We also shadowed (McDonald, 2005; Meunier & Vásquez, 2008) two consultants from
6
7 the HR consultancy unit, Anne and Karen, as they worked with the department's management team
8
9 (consisting in a head doctor and a head nurse) and with department 'leaders' who were doctors and
10
11 other professionals (mainly nurses) with administrative roles. Because of the consultants'
12
13 developmental approach, they collaborated mostly with those leaders and worked with them
14
15 through interviews, meetings, and a series of three-day seminars at a conference facility. We also
16
17 observed the clinical leaders in their everyday work and conducted interviews with them related to
18
19 the upcoming merger. Hence, we adopted a multi-sited approach to the consultants work and to
20
21 department H's preparation for the merger (Marcus, 1995), yet what we observed was not a
22
23 coherent view of the merger (see also Ratner & Gad, 2019). Rather, what we witnessed were series
24
25 of crisscrossing agential lines corresponding to uptakes of one action into another existing under a
26
27 different mode, until the department became something else while remaining department H. Our
28
29 analysis attempts to reveal how these uptakes precisely took place and how they were articulated.
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36 In the next section, we explore the details of these passages by looking at department H's
37
38 daily work and the consultants work in supporting the transition. The case of the merger allows us
39
40 to expect a concentration of such passages. We focus our analysis on interview and observation
41
42 excerpts where the consultants and leaders were especially concerned by how pieces of the puzzle
43
44 would fit together, thus making explicit apparent inconsistencies and breakdowns in the way action
45
46 would move from one part of the department's organization to another. Karen and Anne, the two
47
48 consultants, as well as the department leaders, found themselves having to actively deal with
49
50 desultory existences and tie them back to others. Our analysis followed an abductive reasoning
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52 (Klag & Langley, 2013) and, having Souriau's modes of existence – phenomenon, virtuality, thing,
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 solicitudinary, synapse, and so forth – in mind, we carefully analyzed interview transcripts and
4
5 field notes in search of the many elements that were at play and attempted to identify under what
6
7 mode they exist. We found that elements such as physical objects, abstract concepts and finances
8
9 and budgets were all ways through which department H came to exist. Yet, a crucial part of the
10
11 work related to the merger consisted in these beings existing *together* rather than as separate parts.
12
13 The organizing feature of the synaptic mode of existence was therefore explanatory to us in
14
15 revealing how Department H exist as more things at once. Through our analysis, we noted that
16
17 some modes were more often than others involved in action moving across them. We thus inferred
18
19 four broad categories of intermodal passages, which were critical in our empirical material. These
20
21 four passages show how actions of entities existing under different modalities were articulated.
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27 As we concentrate on the synaptic mode of existence in this article, we decided to avoid
28
29 unnecessarily conceptual vocabulary and use ordinary terms to refer to the elements involved, that
30
31 is, materialities, numbers and abstractions. The first passage we identified was that *materialities*,
32
33 that is, some physical objects, took up the action of other physical objects, such as a building being
34
35 large enough to allow the presence of several beds. The second was that *numbers*, which we
36
37 consider to encapsulate accounting procedures, budgets and funds, would be written down in such
38
39 a way that they were more or less able to allow materialities like beds and buildings, for instance,
40
41 to be taken up and exist in a particular way. Thirdly, *abstractions*, such as consulting principles
42
43 and managerial responsibility in our case, more or less successfully accounted for materialities
44
45 such as the buildings in the new merged Department H. Finally, abstractions were themselves taken
46
47 up by numbers, which again allowed the abstract beings to exist more or less successfully. We
48
49 organize our analysis along these four passages between modes of existence, which are not easily
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51 separated out analytically:
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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- 1
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- 3 (1) materialities taking up materialities,
- 4
- 5 (2) numbers taking up materialities,
- 6
- 7 (3) abstractions taking up materialities
- 8
- 9
- 10 (4) numbers taking up abstractions.
- 11
- 12

13 Of course, we recognize our analysis is only partial and could be done otherwise, as is
14 widely recognized in ethnographic research (Watson, 2011). Also, while we name these categories
15 using “positive” terms, in fact they mostly showed themselves negatively, in hesitations and
16 breakdowns. In analyzing each of the interview quotes and meeting excerpts, we follow the
17 trajectory of beings existing under one mode of existence attempting to pursue their existence into
18 another mode, by ensuring their action is taken up and continued into it. Positively, this materializes
19 as the uptake of a being into another mode. Negatively, this appears as frustration when this uptake
20 is denied or made difficult. These passages reveal how the organization exists as more modes at
21 once and these existences may enable or diminish each other's existence. In this particular case,
22 the stakes are important as failing to be taken up into new modes of existence may mean, in the
23 context of a major hospital merger, that some people, projects, ways of working and other concerns
24 may be left behind.

41 Following a hospital department's synaptic existence

42 The merger was demanding to all departments at the hospital and Department H was no exception.
43
44 The government required the hospital to make savings of 8% on its budget following the merger,
45 and indeed, the hospital management recognized that all staff groups would be affected, and several
46 efficiency initiatives were drafted in preparing for the merger. In what follows we will focus on the
47 four different intermodal passages, which we inferred through our analysis. The move into a new
48 building, the reduction of the number of beds, and shifting treatments outside the hospital, and thus
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 outside the hospital's budgets, all became critical projects, as we will see below; they implicate
4
5 various modes of being, including materialities, numbers, and abstractions.
6
7

Materialities taking up materialities

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9
10 Department H spanned three different geographical sites corresponding to three different ward
11
12 sections. Each of the current buildings was old and posed its own organizing difficulties that were
13
14 widely recognized by department personnel. For instance, patients would often be moved from one
15
16 site to the other, encountering new staff along the way. The most crucial information would
17
18 circulate thanks to the electronic patient record, but the different geographical locations still created
19
20 challenges to organizing continuity of care. Its scattered premises had been improved – for instance,
21
22 tables had been replaced – but the increasing number of patients being treated on an outpatient
23
24 basis put great pressure on continuity of care across the current buildings. These issues were to be
25
26 resolved with the new building, where department H would be unified ‘under a same roof’, but the
27
28 relocation could also cause some difficulties of its own. The merger would mean that department
29
30 H's three different geographical sites were going to join into one, with the consequence of reducing
31
32 the physical space available for beds and requiring the three wards to combine into only two
33
34 sections. As Karen, one of the consultants, explained, “it is a matter of the new physical
35
36 surroundings – there simply is no room for more beds”. Similarly, one clinical leader noted that
37
38 “the physical buildings are critical for our ability to collaborate ... you cannot just move a wall if
39
40 you want to” (Interview, March 2014). Consequently, more treatment would have to be carried out
41
42 on an outpatient basis instead, making the building design complicit of the management's goals to
43
44 reduce costs. This understanding also became illustrated in an interview with the head nurse at
45
46 department H. While looking at the blueprints of the new building, she explained how the new
47
48 location mattered to the department's organization:
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 [...] the issue is that the lines are made by the architects, we cannot
4 change the drawings, but we will have to adjust to the surroundings. We need
5 to adjust our organization to less beds but probably not less patients... The first
6 two beds are to be closed by the end of this year, next year we will close three
7 other beds, and in two years we will close one more bed. We have two large
8 bed sections and one transplant section, which must move into two sections
9 after the merger... This also means that we need to find out if there should be
10 fewer leaders and if our way of organizing the department in specialized team
11 divisions also must be adjusted (Interview, October 2013).
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19 The head nurse notices how the building, in its existence as a blueprint, cannot
20 accommodate the existence of as many beds as the department used to have. This means that there
21 is no other option but to merge different sections, leading also to possibly fewer leadership
22 positions. As she notices this, the head nurse is taking up the drawing's action into her own speech.
23 This articulates a passage from drawings to buildings to beds to the organization of patient
24 treatment. Through this passage, these actions are moving across one another and changing each
25 other's existence. An inconsistency reveals itself in the articulation between the biological
26 existence of patients and their other forms of material existence: as bedridden bodies and as patients
27 under the care of the appropriate section. Health professionals were very aware that they were
28 dealing with bodies that exist precariously: "... it is very difficult illnesses, life-threatening, where
29 people can die within half a day or so [... it] does not respect the holidays, it doesn't care if it is
30 Christmas or New Year's Eve" (Interview, November 2013). To ensure the continued existence of
31 patients – almost literally, since their lives may be at stake – they must be channeled elsewhere: to
32 outpatient care. As outpatients, they would be getting the care they need and then return home.
33 Therefore, their existence would not need to be taken up by beds or other aspects of the
34 department's physical disposition.
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 As we also will see later, the passage from the existence of the new buildings to beds
4 implicated in turn that the existence of patients also articulated a new organizational configuration,
5 with fewer leaders and greater reliance on outpatient care. This new articulation channeled (bodily
6 and medical) action towards a different form of material existence, the home rather than the hospital
7 bed. As such, the organizational existence of department H required much more treatment on an
8 outpatient basis, with a lesser focus on the individual patient.
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Numbers taking up materialities

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19 Another important issue that department H members faced was finances, especially in the context
20 of the cost cuts that are demanded from them. To begin with, the new financial situation the
21 government imposed on the hospital meant it could not continue existing on several sites and had
22 to merge into a single one offering less total space to the department. Numbers affected the space
23 available for beds (as we saw above), but they also directly impacted the availability of beds, as
24 the head nurse described it:
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35 Another difficulty related to the merger is that our staffing is equivalent
36 to beds, and that it depends on budget reductions. We are told that we need to
37 cut costs by 8% in total. This department has a budget of roughly 200 million
38 DKK, and we have also been told that, in addition, we need to reduce 10% of
39 our medical secretaries, but cuts also concern doctors and nurses (Interview,
40 October 2013).
41
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43
44

45 The head nurse's commentary can be understood as showing that less money entails having
46 to let go of personnel, which in turn – given organizational and medical standards – affect the
47 number of beds that can remain open. Finances, thus, do not allow beds to continue their existence
48 through them. However, just as in the case of the building, this also means that members had to
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 find other ways of channeling patient bodies, or risk finding themselves in a contradictory situation.
4

5 This was illustrated by Karen, one of the consultants:
6
7

8 Each time you remove a bed, you subtract some costs. The beds are
9 what matters in the accounts [...] they [the leaders] argue this is an accounting
10 maneuver, since the patients are still there, and they are still overbooked.
11
12 However, they will have to officially close two beds. The overall issue is that
13
14 163 beds will be closed at the hospital [in total] and this is not something they
15 will have reached as a result of new forms of treatment (Meeting, September
16
17 2013).
18
19
20

21 Karen regrets that due to the budget's inability to accommodate beds, it is also unable to
22 continue the patients' existence. As a result, cost savings are not an uptake of bodily and medical
23 action – i.e., patients getting better thanks to new treatments – but are attributable to a disconnect
24 between money and the actions it is supposed to allow. The beds, for their part, are supposed to be
25 a passage point between accounting and treatment, since money is allocated per bed, but when
26 patients are not put in beds, for instance because they are treated on an outpatient basis, then beds
27 stop playing the role of passing patients' existence into the mode of numbers. The uptake from the
28 physical existence of beds and patients to the budgetary mode of existence revealed how the
29 passage from materialities to numbers were a critical way in which Department H existed. This
30 existence articulated further complications in relation to the new organizational configuration after
31 the merger: the new buildings required a reduced number of beds, and thus, the financing of the
32 department appeared to be significantly curtailed.
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49 **Abstractions taking up materialities**

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51 Another passage we observed consisted in materiality coming to exist as abstractions. A key
52 concept that was promoted by hospital management and the consultants in relation to the merger
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 was the notion of “task”. Departments were considered to exist through the “task” they dealt with,
4
5 and they were asked to define their “core task” and to focus on it. This meant, for instance, making
6
7 sure not to do superfluous things and clarify the distribution of labor among department members.
8
9 Indeed, the allocation of resources also had to do with the kind of expertise that was required to
10
11 carry out the department’s tasks. By carefully defining the task, the consultants suggested,
12
13 departments would be able to get the work done despite budget cuts and take better advantage of
14
15 the merger. Signe, the head nurse, explains in an interview how the notion of task is supposed to
16
17 play an articulating role between elements of very different kinds:
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19

20
21
22 We need to find out how to organize ourselves and this is something *we*
23
24 must do, not something the top management will come and do for us. *We* must
25
26 figure out what lies in personnel responsibilities, what lies in responsibilities in
27
28 terms of operations, finances, quality objectives all these becomes very relevant
29
30 during the merger (October 2013).

31
32 The abstract existence of department H, as defined by the concept of the core task, was thus
33
34 supposed to allow money, physical space, competence, personnel and patients to continue their
35
36 existence into each other and converge. Even though this abstract existence was supposedly capable
37
38 to take up the materialities of the new building, in fact it failed, to some extent at least, to capture
39
40 some of the material existences that were at stake during the merger. As Signe recognized:
41
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43

44
45 We have been told that we own the task, but not our physical location,
46
47 and that we need to start collaborating much more across sections and
48
49 departments. Yet, our new physical surroundings do not necessarily reflect this.
50
51 For instance, we will share physical sections with kidney patients, but these are
52
53 vastly different domains of expertise, so how do we make this work – that is a
54
55 question [we need to address] (October 2013).
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 In fact, it turns out that very different kinds of tasks would be carried out in the same space.
4
5 Signe became unsure how to define clear responsibilities between people, and how to spell out
6
7 procedures for operations, finances, and so forth, when teams of different departments, and
8
9 therefore patients with different ailments, would cohabitate.
10
11

12
13 The abstract existence was, however, also allowed, in part, to mitigate this confusion. The
14
15 two consultants, Anne and Karen, defended the notion of core task, and instead viewed many of
16
17 the difficulties the members experienced as a result of disagreement between them on what that
18
19 task should be. As Karen noted during a meeting with department leaders:
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21

22
23 You all tell stories about good cooperation, high loyalty to each other
24
25 and trust [...] however it does not mean that everything works in an optimal
26
27 way. What is less clear, at least for some of you people, is what the concrete
28
29 managerial responsibility consists of in relation to your core task as a
30
31 department. [...] When we ask you if you have a shared job as a team of
32
33 leaders in relation to the department's core task, we get very diverse answers
34
35 (October 2013).

36
37 The abstract notion in itself was capable of allowing the department's diverse modes of
38
39 existence to articulate with each other, provided that in turn the staff took it up and provided it
40
41 existence in the form of a shared agreement as to what "we" as a department are responsible for.
42
43 To say it otherwise, to exist in the passage between materialities and abstractions, the issue would
44
45 lie in the fact that an abstract concept also needs to exist also in a different form, as a common
46
47 belief among a group. If such a common core task could exist, then department H could perhaps
48
49 articulate other tasks and accountabilities. This abstract existence, in its turn, was further taken up
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51 by other modes, which created complications, as we will see below.
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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Numbers taking up abstractions

In the same way as the abstract notion of a core task had to continue its existence through a shared understanding, the other abstract concept of managerial responsibility, had to exist through other modes. One of these modes was numbers, and especially budgets, which was put to the test by the upcoming merger and the cost cuts. For instance, department H leaders were concerned that there was a discrepancy between the way budgets were decided upon and their level of managerial responsibility. As a ward manager, Lis, explained:

Our different sections also have their own budgets, which makes it easier getting an overview of where the money is spent. The issue, though, is that the budgets do not always reflect our level of managerial responsibility. We do not have the mandate to decide on many things, so although the budget is a huge consideration in our daily work, it is also a thing that we cannot always do much about (Interview, November 2013).

In this quote, Lis points out how local managers cannot change budgetary attributions and must therefore follow them without being able to make amendments. Thus, passing from abstractions to numbers gave existence to a certain conception of how departments and their subunits must be run, and while they may give the impression that they are in charge, these same numbers in fact do not allow the existence of local leaders' managerial responsibility, as Lis remarks. This contradicts the previous quotes concerning the "core task", which supposedly allowed departments to decide on how best to distribute responsibility and run their activities. In this sense, at times doctors and nurses had to decide on treatment options that went beyond budgets, and found themselves in a contradiction between the responsibility towards their patients that defines them as health professionals and their existence as members of a department that supposedly operates thanks to a particular budget. The department was thus torn between its

ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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1
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3 existence as a day-to-day service to patients and as an administrative unit existing in numbers and
4
5 dashboards.
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8 When, during a meeting, the consultants, Anne and Karen, emphasized the importance of
9
10 defining the department's core task, the ambiguous role of budgets and finances in relation to the
11
12 everyday work at department H became salient. The consultants seemed to downplay the everyday
13
14 presence of numbers when discussing tasks at the department. In the following excerpt, clinical
15
16 leaders (Nigel, Betty and Fred) respond to the consultants' (Karen and Anne) suggestion of doing
17
18 three seminars to define the common core task:
19
20
21

22
23 Nigel: Okay, now I have to ask, where is the department management
24
25 team in this process?
26

27 Karen: They are not directly part of the program from here, it is targeted
28
29 at you. [...]
30

31 Betty: I have to confess that what is of utmost importance to me is the
32
33 place I am running in my everyday practice [is that] the common core task that
34
35 you are speaking about is actually something that involves the department
36
37 management team, and is not something we can just make decisions on during
38
39 seminars. [...] Aligning these things at the department is also a matter of
40
41 finances, collaboration with the blood test and biochemistry lab, the
42
43 radiotherapy department.
44

45 Karen: Okay, but we will not focus on finances, as you mentioned.
46
47 Actually, we do not care about finances in the program [said in a jovial tone].
48

49 Betty responds with perplexity: We do care about them [finances] [...]
50
51 it is a large part of our everyday task!
52

53 Karen: Well, it is the task of the department management, isn't it?
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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3 Betty: There are two elements to the financial aspect; one is that they
4 [the department management] have a big part of the job...

5
6
7 Fred interrupts Betty: You've mentioned that the aim was development
8 on the actual managerial conditions of the department: finances are also an
9 important condition! (Meeting, October 2013)
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12

13 The consultant's proposal that conversations during a seminar would allow defining the
14 department's "core task" is first resisted by Nigel who sees that the department management team
15 is missing from this format. Similarly, Betty stresses the importance of having the management
16 team present. These concerns may be seen as showing how an abstraction – the seminar format –
17 fails to take up another abstraction, namely the various managerial responsibilities and the
18 decisional power of each person.
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27 However, what is of interest in this excerpt is how Betty mentions, at the end of her first
28 intervention, a list of elements that she feels matter for the department but are excluded from
29 conversations, including finances. Arguably, managerial abstractions matter to leaders precisely
30 because they support the existence of the financial reality that makes these other elements possible.
31 Karen's attempt to attribute finances to the management team only reinforces the importance of
32 having them attend the discussion, as the leaders requested. The leaders' reaction, especially
33 Betty's, can be understood as reflecting that they cannot consider the existence of department H
34 without also considering its existence through numbers, as their actions must be taken up in budgets
35 to take place. Grasping the existence of Department H requires accounting for managerial
36 responsibility, and in turn the abstract existence of managerial responsibility longs to be taken up
37 in the mode of numbers. In other words, numbers are an important way in which the department,
38 its "everyday practice", and its hierarchy exist.
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The Organization's Synaptic Mode of Existence

The above analysis shows that department H, like any organization, exists through many other *things* or modes, such as materialities, abstractions and numbers. In turn, each of these beings experiences and bears witness to the others in its own key, which provides it with a unique perspective on “the existence of what they group together” (Stengers, 2000: 97). Buildings, beds, software, managerial and medical responsibilities, core tasks and budgets are all ways through which the department exists. However, this is not only because they would stand in for an intangible organization, but also because they continue each other's action, as buildings offer space to beds and sections, beds offer rest to patients, as budgets offer staff for each bed and allow (or disallow) managers to make decisions. Interestingly, these passages were more obvious in their breakdowns than in their success.

As the leaders were perplexed by the inability of some modes of existence to take up others and witnessed some existences being “blocked,” they had to actively find other routes through which to channel each being's action. For instance, they were considering to treat patients on an outpatient basis, which would move them outside of the building, outside of the beds, but also outside of the budget, thus not requiring these elements to take up their biological and financial existence. Hence, the leaders' perplexity highlights that to organize is to make possible passages between modes of existence.

Budgets, for instance, provide existence to all facets of the department, including to a conception of managerial roles that distributes authority between the department management team and other department leaders. If budgets were omitted, as the consultants wanted to do during the seminars, the chain of existential uptakes would be broken, and the department would not be sufficiently present for decisions to be made about it; decisions would not reverberate down the

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3 chain, and indeed, there may be no chain left. Similarly, the head nurse points to the importance of
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5 considering the built environment, since any decisions concerning beds, distribution of roles and
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7 treatment option must take into account the available space and the presence in that space of
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9 patients from other departments.
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13 A crucial aspect that can be noticed in the data excerpts presented above is that clinical
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15 leaders always talk in terms of their daily work and of the activities they have to carry out. To them,
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17 the existence of their departments and the changes that must apparently be carried out as part of
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19 the merger are relevant inasmuch as they impact their action, and in particular the kind of treatments
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21 they will provide to patients. This allows us to appropriate the work of Souriau into organization
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23 studies and argue that organizing happens each time passages between modes of existence take
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25 place and one of them takes up another mode's action. The reason why budgets matter to beds is
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27 not some immaterial relation between the two, but the fact that budgets may interrupt the bed's
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29 ability to offer a resting and treatment space for patients. That is why outpatient treatment becomes
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31 an alternative: people have beds and other furniture at home, which may accomplish the same
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33 action.
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39 Arguably, another possible reading is that what is at stake is also leaders' and consultants'
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41 individual existence under the facet of their professional identity. This is particularly noticeable
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43 when physicians and nurses feel they cannot give up treatment solely for budgetary purposes or
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45 regret that savings do not reflect actual improvements in treatment efficiency. For instance, valuing
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47 collaboration with the blood testing and biochemistry lab matters to them as these collaborations
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49 allow them to continue their identities: if the lab stopped providing them crucial information, their
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51 existence as health professionals would be impoverished. Such a reading based on identity
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53 emphasizes the leaders' understanding of what goes on.
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3 However, many other passages between modes of existence took place, without the
4 necessary mediation of human beings, even though they may be difficult to capture empirically. It
5 is true that our data relies on what people have said, and therefore on one particular form of
6 communication that served, in this study, as a proxy to these other, non-human communications or
7 passages. For instance, the conversational situation of the meeting confronted different
8 configurations of beings against each other and tested the strength of existential chains. In that
9 sense, the meeting itself even acted as a synapse, operating passages between modes of existence.
10 Human communication, then, was a plane of existence where other modes were made to speak to
11 each other and where decisions were made as to whether some beings were included or not, and
12 ultimately, who or what would survive.
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Discussion and Conclusion

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29 The case presented above shows that, like any other organization, a clinical department exists
30 through multiple modes of existence at once that continue their action into each other. It is therefore
31 necessarily multimodal; it exists as an “and”, “or”, “but” and in other traces of articulation, rather
32 than in any substantive entity. Passages must be found between beings for the organization to go
33 on existing, for it *is* all about those passages. The many modes of existence that organizations
34 enable or deter matter to organizational members, but also matter to one another, since taking one
35 out – like finances – may alter the ability of the others to exist, to act, and to articulate into a
36 coherent whole. Speaking in terms of modes of existence therefore draws attention to the way in
37 which different kinds of entities do not merely co-exist beside each other inside an organization,
38 but that organizing is passing between modes of existence as they continue their action and
39 existence into each other. The organization serves as a synapse for the continuing existence of the
40 beds, patients, responsibilities, and so forth. Alternatively, since bodies would not be able to
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3 continue its existence as patients outside the walls of the hospital, the organization had to adapt in
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5 order to serve as a synapse connecting those outside bodies to the hospital by creating additional
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7 outpatient services. These existences reveal themselves in the actions taking place, and the
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9 possibility for them to be furthered is sometimes enabled, sometimes blocked. Several
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11 contributions emanate from our analysis and in the following part we elaborate on them.
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A call for irreduction: embracing the multiplicity of existence

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17 Saying that an organization corresponds to the synaptic mode may appear as a reduction to a single
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19 mode, but since the synaptic is an articulation between other modes, it is actually an
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21 acknowledgement of multiplicity. Each mode matters in itself because we need the *physical*
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23 properties of a molecule to provide medication, the *psychological* existence of skilled and caring
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25 medical personnel to pass it on, etc. However, the existence of all of them *as an organization* and
26
27 as a hospital lies in the articulation of all of them. Moreover, any articulation between modes would
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29 not lead to the emergence of *this* particular organization. As such, the synaptic mode of existence
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31 contrasts with current understandings of organizations that attempt to list ahead of time the modes
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33 by which organizations would exist, or even to reduce them to one sort of entity, for instance the
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35 social or the material (Leonardi & Barley, 2010). A Souriau-inspired view invites us not to think
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37 in dialectical terms, as that would suppose only two modes of existence that would necessarily
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39 oppose or contradict each other (Putnam, 2015). In this sense, it is not only that some organizations
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41 are monstrosities that bring together bits and parts that were not originally meant to go together;
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43 instead, the existence of any being, including the organization, supposes that it also exists as
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45 something else (Thanem, 2006). By reducing the richness of existence, studies that limit the
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47 number of modes of existence fragilize the organizations they seek to explain, as they create 'a
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49 feeling of a decrease in being', because 'each mode of being, reduced to what it intrinsically is,
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3 will appear tenuous and fragile' (Souriau, 2015: 123). We must therefore revisit how we do
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5 research and how we write, and realize that even our practices as researchers (fail to) reproduce
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7 organizations in particular ways by connecting beings together in specific ways, at the exclusion
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9 of others (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012). In particular, giving priority to human experience and
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11 understanding, even when recognizing that there may be multiple valid metaphors to speak of
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13 organizations, risks assuming that organizations are reducible to what they mean to some people
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15 (Morgan, 1986; Schoeneborn, Vasquez & Cornelissen, 2016). Similarly, thinking in terms of
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17 metaphors may suggest that the issue would just be that we analysts are not 'speaking the same
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19 language' (c.f., March & Simon, 1958: 5).
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25 In contrast, our case shows that the organization exists under several modes of existence; it
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27 is many things at once, as passages between entities of different natures actuate those different
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29 modes, thus recognizing existential pluralism. Saying that it exists under the synaptic mode is not
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31 a reduction to one mode, but on the contrary recognizes that the organization exists in the interstices
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33 between modes, where it operates their articulation and ensures that action passes from one to the
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35 next. This is an empirical fact with which participants themselves are confronted in critical
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37 moments and in their everyday work. Indeed, to quote Souriau (2015: 123) once more: 'beings
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39 [are] established in several modes simultaneously, making each commensurate with all the others
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41 and assembling them all within itself'. In other words, organizing occurs amid complexes of
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43 existence.
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49 An eloquent demonstration of this is offered when elements existing under different modes
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51 constrain each other and resist human attempts at making them say or do things. For instance, later
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53 in the meeting presented above, the consultants suggested that physicians will be able to go back
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55 home for the holidays after the seminars, hence implying that time spend with the consultants will
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3 be unnoticed in their everyday work. However, the leaders opposed because they actually had to
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5 be back to see patients. This statement transposes a 30-day diagnosis guarantee established by
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7 government decree, which is embedded into the hospital's IT system. In this sense, the leaders'
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9 opposition to the consultants, and their presence at the department on those dates, reflects that
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11 disease and biology, but also government regulations and IT algorithms, cannot be easily aligned
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13 with the consultant's proposed line of action. Thus, materiality may resist human enrolment
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15 (Stengers, 2000), but more broadly modes of existence may be so tightly locked into each other
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17 that they resist new uptakes of action.
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Ontologizing organizational politics

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24 The inability of some modes of existence or of some configurations of modes to take up new,
25
26 different forms of action may help strengthen our understanding of the politics of organizing
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28 beyond a simple contest for resources, a pursuit of control or freedom from constraints. In our case,
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30 the consultants were not deliberately pursuing political goals (at least we have no reason to believe
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32 so), and yet politics was happening. Selections were being made; passages were enabled or
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34 impeded. Because of the consulting approach that was adopted, the department management team
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36 and finances would not be included in the seminars, which meant that some configurations –
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38 including the department's authority structure – risked being left on the curbside. The solution
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40 would not only come from the conventional tools of authority and power, such as struggles and
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42 persuasion, but also from a refitting of the seminar program to create opportunities for the uptake
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44 of existing authority structures and of financial issues, for instance by inviting a member of the
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46 department management team and including an updated financial statement in participants' kits.
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53 If politics refers to the many decisions that are made about group formation (Latour, 2005:
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55 27), that is, about who or what to include and exclude in the organizing process (see also Sturdy,
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3 Clark, Fincham, et al., 2009), the (in)ability of some beings to take up and continue the action and
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5 existence of others to constitute the group and operate under this “we” is also a matter of politics.
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7 Indeed, discrimination and other practices that create or maintain power imbalance are closely
8
9 related to whose voice and action is taken into account and how (Pompper, 2017; Mik-Meyer,
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11 2016). Thinking in Souriau’s terms reminds us, however, that beings, including human beings,
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13 exist through multiple modes at once, and are scattered across more or less abled bodies, computers
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15 containing their private data, projects they invest their time and energy into, and so forth. The same
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17 goes for politics, as a mode of existence that continues into others: artefacts are political (Latour,
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19 1992), and politics have artefacts (Joerges, 1999) and discourses (Chiang, 2015). Being sensitive
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21 to the politics of inclusion, therefore, is not only a matter of listening to everyone’s voice in the
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23 literal sense, but also a matter of finding ways for everyone to continue their existence, in all of its
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25 diversity, through the organization.
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32 Depending on how a financial or bureaucratic system is conceived, it may allow or not the
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34 full existence within the organization of some people or things; in case of failure, the organization
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36 may deal with these discarded beings by constituting them as “monsters” (Munro, 2001). Far from
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38 being limited to exceptional, ‘unfortunate’ events (Latour, 2013b), organizational politics is
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40 therefore embedded in the synaptic ability or inability to continue one being’s existence into
41
42 another. Politics, then, is not only rivalry in the pursuit of interests, in the conventional sense, but
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44 also of *inter-esse*, of *being in between* (Callon, 1984). As Stengers (2000: 94) notes, *inter-esse* “not
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46 only means to stand in the way of, but first of all to make a link”, because to interest is to create
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48 “the sensibility to a possible becoming” (Stengers, 2000: 92). Accordingly, the question becomes
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50 *who* or *what* will be interested to take up another’s existence. This question is crucial, because, as
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3 Stengers (1997: 165) notes, reality itself depends on it: indeed, reality is “that which demonstrates
4 its existence by bringing together a multiplicity of disparate interests and practice.”
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8 We may say, then, that the passage from one mode of being to another is supposed to interest
9 or create a link between multiple beings but also to allow organizational reality to exist in a certain
10 way. For instance, when the consultants in our case invoked a passage between an abstract
11 existence through the “core task” and material beings, doctors were supposed to be interested in
12 the merger and accept the authority of the core task as a way of organizing it. If the doctors allowed
13 this passage to interest them, they also, as Stengers (2000: 94) notes, accept that this passage
14 engages them in a certain way and that it “prescribes a duty and confers a right”. Being included
15 among a group is therefore all the more political as it is through the other members of that group
16 that each person or entity exists. To include someone is to accept that they continue their existence
17 into ours and to form a collective with them is to create devices and structures to allow this
18 continuity. This is political in the same way that we exclude refugees by denying them education
19 in our schools, jobs in our businesses, or healthcare in our hospitals, because it alters their existence
20 and ours, while they may become uneducated, unemployed and sick and we become an intolerant
21 society with increasing poverty. Similarly, the many beings that we do not welcome in our
22 organizations, for instance in our case management team members, finances and the department
23 authority structure, may become weaker and dwell in the organization's margins, and we also suffer
24 from their absence. As such, power relations are implicated whenever existences attempt to
25 continue into others. Such passages attempt to articulate disparate interests that do not necessarily
26 align. What is being included or excluded in the passage also shows the inherent relationship
27 between organizing and disorganizing or how connections are both made and un-made in the
28 passage (Cooper, 1986; Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, et al., 2015).
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3 The inevitability of politics and exclusion may be understood by the fact that the
4 organization (the department but also the hospital it was part of) *demand*ed things to be done, and
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6 became more demanding as it gained existence through different modes, in the same way as
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8 Souriau, in a different text, describes the sculptor as responding to the work of art's demands as it
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10 comes into being (Souriau, 1956). Conversely, as the organization acquires more existence, it also
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12 gives up on being something else.
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What organizing means

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19 Understanding the organization as existing under a synaptic mode updates some classical themes
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21 of organization studies. Organizations have been traditionally associated with notions such as the
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23 division of labor (Smith, 1801; Babbage, 1832; Taylor, 1911) and coordination of work (Fayol,
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25 1949; Barnard, 1968). A Souriau-inspired view of the organization as a synaptic articulation
26
27 between modes of existence reveals that division of labor and coordination do not happen within
28
29 pre-existing organizations. Also, they do not only concern human beings who need to collaborate.
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31 Rather, organizing *is* coordinating – or articulating, as we have referred to it – among diverse modes
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33 of existence and, when they are not sufficient, instaurating new ones. This view of organizing takes
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35 seriously the idea that organizing rests on autonomous processes of desire (Linstead & Brewis,
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37 2007; Hietanen, Andéhn & Wickström, 2019), but also clarifies that this desire corresponds to a
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39 thirst for further existence through others. This means that the organization exists in the articulating
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41 work of making one being's action and existence into another's. Recalling our case, are the patients
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43 in the beds, are the beds in the buildings and in the budget, or is the budget in the discussions? If
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45 not, we need to find other ways of making sure that the things we value – such as patients – continue
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47 to exist, for instance by keeping them in their own bed at home: a new form of organizing emerges,
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49 namely outpatient care. In that sense, *dis*organization would correspond to moments when such
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ORGANIZATION'S SYNAPTIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

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uptake of action does not happen, and patients, beds, buildings, budgets and discussions each do their own thing rather than continuing each other's existence (see also Cooper, 1986; Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, et al., 2015; Vásquez & Kuhn, 2019). Organizing, then, is a synaptic meta-mode that federates the others, or, to say it another way, it corresponds to the dash that connects modes of existence.

A synaptic view also contributes to a richer definition of communication, a notion that has been gaining popularity as an exploration of relational organizational constitution (Kuhn, Ashcraft & Cooren, 2017). Our case shows that the synaptic mode of existence may be understood as communication between other modes. Our data, which consist mostly of what people have said, may imply that human communication is a privileged mode of existence where other modes are articulated. However, beyond an exclusive focus on written and oral speech, communication-based studies must not only account for exchanges between human beings but also for the passage of action across a diversity of modes. As such, the study of communication's role in the constitution of organization is not only 'a platform of organizational analysis' (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, et al., 2011: 1163) but a potential shift in the very understanding of communication. If we want to empirically observe how organizing and organizations take place in passages between modes of existence, and understand the communication between them, then we need a theory of communication that accounts in similar terms for the words of human beings and the kind of contributions that can be made by a wide array of other non-human beings (Bencherki, 2016; Cooren, 2015). This goes further than typical analyses of interview and meeting data. By attempting to also capture how communication may happen within and through technology, bodies and other beings such a theory views communicating and organizing on the same terms. To this day, organizational communication research has mostly shown how communication in the

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3 conventional sense of 'what people say, write, or do' (Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, et al., 2014:
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5 290) contributes to organizing processes, rather than understand communicating itself as co-
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7 extensive with organizing (Bencherki & Iliadis, 2019). While the outline of such a perspective,
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9 remains to be sketched up, focusing on the organizations synaptic mode of existence may offer a
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11 way to pursue that agenda.
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16 Finally, thinking in terms of the synaptic mode, and of communication as one form which
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18 this may take, specifies the relational program in organization studies. Until now, relationality has
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20 remained a relatively abstract idea, with few analytical tools to look specifically at how relations
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22 are established and what it is that happens through them to allow organizations to emerge (Cooper,
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24 2005a; Emirbayer, 1997). With the synaptic perspective, we can now hint at how to conduct
25
26 relational research. Namely, we must observe those moments when the action of one being, existing
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28 under one mode of existence, is taken up and continued by another. Indeed, organizing happens
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30 when documents, technologies, ideas, procedures, budgets, beds and people find ways of pursuing
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32 each other's action and existence.
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