



## Through a Glass Darkly: Tales of Super-Capitalism

Christian De Cock

University of Exeter, UK

**review of:**

**Banks, I. (1999) *The Business*. London: Abacus.**  
(HB: pp.393, £16.99, ISBN 0316648442)

**Ballard, J.G. (2000) *Super-Cannes*. London: Flamingo.**  
(HB: pp.392, £16.99, ISBN 0002258471)

**Powers, R. (2000) *Gain: A Novel*. London: William Heinemann.**  
(HB: pp.355, £15.99, ISBN 0434008621)

I am pleased. Very pleased indeed. Three authors, all renowned to a greater or lesser extent for exploring the 'darker' side of human existence, have recently tackled one of the most underwritten subjects in fiction: business. The novels of Banks, Ballard, and Powers deal with the big corporations and their powerful executives, so dominating our lives in an age of triumphal capitalism. Of course, the dysfunctions of capitalism have been discussed at length in the academic literature (most recently under the label 'critical management') and popular non-fictional texts (e.g. Naomi Klein's well received *No Logo* and the accompanying special report on the UK Channel 4 News in October 2000). But whatever their particular strengths, these critiques find it hard to equal the sheer invention, raw emotive power, and the delicate narrative constructions offered by master storytellers at the height of their creative powers.

So yes, I am pleased, but also somewhat surprised. The pervasive social phenomenon we conveniently refer to as 'Business' is not an obvious choice for authors whom at some stage in their career all have been referred to as 'avant-garde'. This review will examine how Banks, Ballard and Powers fare in their encounter with 'Business'. At this moment it suffices to say that after the treatment at the hands of our 'merry trio', the reader will find it hard to look upon big corporations and their executives in quite the same way.

A particular textual strategy I employed in writing this review is to incorporate the readers' reviews that appeared on the Amazon UK website. Whilst by no means implying that there exists such as thing as a 'typical' reader, or even being particularly enamoured with the

idea of giving a book a ‘score’, the readers’ responses, contradictory as they inevitably are, nevertheless provide a good flavour of the reception of the books. Table 1 below contains an overview of readers’ reactions (with 5 being the highest score) to the three books.

| Author                | Banks | Ballard | Powers |
|-----------------------|-------|---------|--------|
| <i>No. of reviews</i> | 50    | 7       | 25     |
| 5*                    | 3     | 3       | 12     |
| 4*                    | 10    | 2       | 4      |
| 3*                    | 16    | 1       | 5      |
| 2*                    | 13    | 1       | 2      |
| 1*                    | 8     | 0       | 2      |

Table 1

## The Business (1999)

Key protagonist Kate Telman is a Level 3, powerful senior executive in the Business. The eponymous organisation is ancient, rich and invisible:

The origins of what we now call the Business predate the Christian church, but not the Roman Empire, to which it might fairly be said we owe our existence, and which, at one point – technically at any rate – we owned. (p.37)

Kate gets involved in the machinations of Level 1 execs when the Business decides to buy its own state – Thulan – in order to acquire a seat at the United Nations. Banks traces Kate’s responses as the plot unfolds: her personal/professional life (of course for the 21<sup>st</sup> century executive the two are irrevocably intertwined) is very much the focus of the book. We are treated to various bizarre side-shows of the super rich business elite (such as a Scud missile owning American Level 1 executive), some of whom display behaviours which could at best be described as ‘eccentric’. Ultimately Kate ends up doing exactly what the business expects of her – conceding to marry the Prince of Thulan – but with the opposite aim of Level 1 executives, in that she intends to put her skills to use in protecting Thulan:

“For the first time in my life I can really do some good. Or fail in the attempt.”  
“What you’re saying is their country needs you.”  
“I suppose I am. Sounds a bit presumptuous, put like that, but yes.”  
“You’re the fucking Peace Corps.”  
“I’m the fucking Marines, Luce.” (p.391)

*The Business* got by far the roughest ride in the reviews, notwithstanding the fact that many of the readers were self-avowed Banks fans. To those disappointed readers the book appeared somewhat dull, with little of the dark humour and vicious plotlines that were so appealing in books like *Complicity* and *Use of Weapons*, making it almost an ‘un-Banksian’ book. As one reader put it:

I think that the important word here has been used in a previous review: savagery. It’s because he could be so downright nasty that I have found most of Iain Banks’ books compelling; his best works are epic in imagination, written at cracking pace, and well, horrible. It’s an element that is noticeable by its absence from *The Business*.

Another one suggested:

There is an overwhelming feeling that the subject being tackled is not compatible with Banks' writing style... Banks' obvious talents remain too constrained by a story that simply fails to rise to the heights of previous achievements.

So does business get the better of Banks? Perhaps a little. Undoubtedly this book lacks Banks' trademark excesses. His usual vicious irony is a little muted and a more gentle satire takes its place. But there are still the usual quirks of characterisation and unforgettable scenes are dotted around, making *The Business* as much of a page-turner as some of his best work.

So where does this reader stand? I would rate *The Business* quite highly, although I can well understand the frustration of some of the fans. The book is not 'savage' by any stretch of the imagination, which is a little disappointing in light of the business excesses described in the book. Yet, as an academic teaching business studies I can distinguish perhaps the concurrent realistic/parodic (and for this reason subversive) elements of the book a little more clearly. Indeed, Banks must have picked up quite a few copies of "Heathrow Airport Organisation Theory" (cf. Burrell, 1997) in his research efforts. Chapter 4, which opens with Kate offering "Let me explain some things about the way our company works..." is a gem in this respect. The Business is democratic: "we vote for our bosses". Executives above level 6 have to swear they have given up any religious faith they previously espoused (although the Business does not insist they actually stop worshipping in public or private). The Business practices total financial transparency, and corruption is frowned upon:

not because it is intrinsically evil but because it acts like a short-circuit in the machinery of business, or a parasite on the body corporate. (p.93)

Yet, the Business is:

quite happy to deal with corrupt regimes and people... In all this, of course, we're just the same as any other business or state. It's just that we've been doing it longer and are less hypocritical about it, so we're better at it. Practice makes perfect, even the practice of corruption. It ought to be one of our mottoes: Corruption – we deal with it. (p.94)

What is so striking in this novel is that the Business' executives finds it so easy to manipulate the world – ultimately the quest for a UN seat is little more than a diversion for immensely rich and powerful people. They do it:

because they love the organising, the gamesmanship of it all, the buzz of getting away with adding zero to their personal worth just for the sheer hell of it. (p.375-376)

The reader could look upon *The Business* as an entertaining little fantasy about the astonishingly powerful, but when he or she turns to non-fictional descriptions of the behaviour of today's executives (e.g. Frank, 2001; Klein, 2000; Mokhiber and Weissman, 1999) it quickly becomes apparent that the line between parody and well-researched 'facts' is a very thin one indeed.

## Super-Cannes (2000)

If Banks' fans are somewhat justified in complaining about a lack of savagery and nastiness, readers of J.G. Ballard's latest terrifying dystopia would be hard pushed to come to such a conclusion. Rape, voyeuristic sex, random violence, murder, drug-abuse, paedophilia; you name it, *Super-Cannes* provides it somewhere in its pages.

The actions described in the novel centre on the new high-tech Business Park of Eden-Olympia (loosely mirrored on the existing Business Park of Sophia Antipolis), part of Europe's newly emerging version of Silicon Valley at the Côte d'Azur. Transnational capitalism's most dynamic corporations (Ballard refers to a variety of household names - 3M, Exxon, Hyundai, BP Amoco, Hoechst, Ciba, Motorola, Unilever - throughout the novel) and their top executives have converged on Eden-Olympia. According to its resident psychologist, Wilder Penrose, Eden-Olympia is "a huge experiment in how to hothouse the future... an ideas laboratory for the new millennium." Ballard is quite clear about the topicality of his novel:

Whether we like it or not, Eden-Olympia is the face of the future. Already there are hundreds of business and science parks around the world. Most of us - or at least, most professional people - are going to spend our entire working lives in them. (p.254)

The key protagonist in *Super-Cannes* is Paul Sinclair, whose young wife Jane has been offered a position as doctor in Eden-Olympia. Shortly after their arrival Paul finds out that Jane's predecessor, David Greenwood, has died in a shooting spree during which he massacred a number of notable executives. *Super-Cannes* is part detective novel, as Paul takes on the role of sleuth trying to unravel the web of intrigue that led to the fatal shootings. However, in his every move he is carefully observed by Wilder Penrose. As Paul is later told:

"They ran a special trial designed to explain what went wrong with David. You were their laboratory rat. Penrose wanted you to take on David's role, and start to think like him." (p.335)

But the relation between Penrose and Sinclair is more complex than that between man-in-white-coat and laboratory rat. Penrose makes it his personal quest to convince Paul Sinclair (and by extension the reader) of the importance and validity of the Eden-Olympia social experiment (and by extension that of super-capitalism). It is a clever narrative strategy that allows Ballard to paint a convincing but ever so frightening picture of 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations, complete with glaring paradoxes.

"Today's professional men and women are self-motivated. The corporate pyramid is a virtual hierarchy that endlessly reassembles itself around them. They enjoy enormous mobility... In many ways I'm a kind of leisure coordinator. I run the adventure playground inside their heads. It's open to everyone here. You can explore your hidden dreams, the secret places of your heart. You can follow your imagination, wherever it leads." (p.96)

"So Eden-Olympia has gone beyond morality?"

"In a sense yes... A giant multinational like Fuji or General Motors sets its own morality. The company defines the rules that govern how you treat your spouse, where you educate your children, the sensible limits to stock-market investment... We can rely on their judgement, and that leaves us free to get on with the rest of our lives. We've achieved real freedom, the freedom of morality." (p.95)

As Paul gets closer and closer to the truth about what happened on the fateful day of the shootings, he discovers that many company senior executives are involved in perverse and deadly 'games'. In a chapter called 'The Therapy Programme', Penrose explains how what at first appears perverse and amoral is actually obvious, sensible and sane. This is very much Ballard at his best, juggling with notions of right and wrong, and throwing up huge question marks in the process<sup>1</sup>. It's worth quoting extracts of the dialogue at some length:

Paul accuses Penrose:

"You've known everything about Eden-Olympia and done nothing?... It's another Alice world – corporate profits are higher than anywhere else in Europe and the people earning them are going mad together." (p.250)

Penrose counters:

"At Eden-Olympia, madness is the cure, not the cause of the malaise. Our problem is not that too many people are insane, but too few." (p.253-260)

He goes on to provide some background to the 'therapy programme':

"We're breeding a new race of deracinated people, internal exiles without human ties but with enormous power. It's this new class that runs our planet. To be successful enough to work at Eden-Olympia calls for rare qualities of self-restraint and intelligence. These are people who won't admit to any weakness and won't allow themselves to fail..."

Yet, these new super-humans were not functioning well:

Chief executives and main-board directors stumbled into work with persistent viral complaints. Worse than that, they all reported a loss of mental energy. Decision-making took longer, and they felt distracted by anxieties they couldn't identify. Chronic fatigue syndrome haunted the place..."

What the executives needed was:

A carefully metered measure of psychopathy. Nothing too criminal or deranged. More like an adventure-training course... Vigilante actions, incidents of deliberate road rage, thefts from immigrant markets, tangles with the Russian Mafiosi... The benefits were astounding. Immune levels rose through the ceiling, within three months there wasn't a trace of insomnia or depression... Corporate profits and equity values began to climb again. The treatment worked."

At this stage Paul is at best ambivalent about the goings-on at Eden-Olympia. Another character accuses him:

You secretly think Penrose is right, and a new kind of world is being born here, based on psychopathology. You're deeply impressed by Eden-Olympia." (p.351)

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<sup>1</sup> Ballard does drop a few subtle hints as to whom he believes is really deranged (if I am mistaken, then his vision of humanity is even darker than I think it is). He has Penrose say:

"Meaningless violence may be the true poetry of the new millennium. Perhaps only gratuitous madness can define who we are." (p.262)

Another character provides a very different view on "going beyond morality":

"Eden-Olympia's great defect is that there's no need for personal morality. Thousands of people live and work here without making a single decision about right and wrong. The moral order is engineered into their lives along with the speed limits and the security systems." (p.255)

As Paul continues his investigation he makes further discoveries. The three local hostages, presumably also killed by David Greenwood, actually had been executed under supervision of the Eden-Olympia security chief (who later gets murdered himself). David Greenwood had been running a full-scale paedophile ring and his mad revenge attack had been aimed at all the people who had corrupted him. The novel ends as Paul, realising “what needs to be done”, prepares to engage in a shooting spree of his own, having whisked away his wife to safety in London.

Whilst the number of reviews is much more limited (the book was published as recently as September 2000), Ballard’s novel can count on a much warmer reception than Banks’. There were only 2 dissenting voices (see table 1), the gist of which are captured in the following quote:

The characters in this work are under-whelmingly superficial and ‘wooden’. In the main the superficiality of the work seems to be a consequence of Ballard’s lack of knowledge/understanding of concepts and debates which are at the core of theorising about morality, late capitalism and E technologies.

A point which is both fair and unfair. Ballard has no interest whatsoever in providing an in-depth analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism, the point being that one only has to scratch the surface to discover all its discontents. The ‘wooden’ characterisation is part and parcel of Ballard’s dark vision. Indeed the reverse would have detracted from the integrity of the work. *Super-Cannes* contains a brilliant narrative about new social structures and their associated psychopathologies. In terms of sheer shock-value and perspective jamming this novel is without equal among texts (conceived of here in their broadest sense, thus including the work of academics) on the 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation. Ballard has never shied away from controversy (viz. his novel *Crash*), but he seems to be growing fiercer as the decades pass. The irony in *Super-Cannes* is vicious indeed. The image of all-powerful executives – “they know the world would collapse without them, and they can get away with anything” (p.344) – turning into playgroup Nazis, with all the associated excesses, creates an effect close to the tradition of Grand Guignol. Yet, Ballard never quite pushes things so far that the plot would degenerate into self-parody. The parallels with events in 20<sup>th</sup> century history are drawn with chilling premonitory power:

We’re back in Weimar Germany, with a weekend Freikorps fighting the Reds. Sooner or later some corporate raider with a messianic streak will turn up... and decide that social Darwinism deserves another go... Wilder Penrose and Delage have to be stopped, along with their lunatic scheme. Not because it’s crazy, but because it’s going to work.. The whole world will soon be a business-park colony, run by a lot of tight-lipped men who pretend to be weekend psychos. (p.344-345)

Long live the New Economy!

### **Gain: A Novel (1998 US edition, 2000 UK edition)**

Richard Powers’ novel is the most academic by far. It is significant that the author feels the need to flag up that *Gain* is a novel to a reader who might be taken in by the wealth of detail provided, thus thinking that the book is a non-fictional account. *Gain*, in parts, reads like a well-crafted business history, painstakingly researched (clearly involving more and

better research than the average business book) and convincingly composed with evocative details. For example, Powers' description of the evolving structures of the Clare organisation throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, of the role of its sociology department, and of the changing advertising fashions would be a great addition to any intelligent management textbook. *Gain* also contains all the information on soap making one would normally find in an instruction manual. Some less-impressed readers clearly found it hard to deal with the level of detail:

It reads like a Harvard Business School case report a major soap company/ conglomerate.

However, *Gain* already has received significant recognition in that the novel won the James Fenimore Cooper prize for Historical Fiction from the society of American Historians. In *Gain*, Powers tells a tale of people, ideas, and structures moving through time and mutually affecting one another. The social, the natural and the discursive are intertwined. Not totally surprising, therefore, that Bruno Latour considers *Gain* as the best business book ever written (a tip-off from one of the *ephemera* editors). Even a review in *Business Week* was full of praise for the book:

*Gain* is a demanding volume that will leave readers marvelling at the author's erudition and troubled over the apparent price of civilization.

The novel consists of two stories, one historical and one contemporary. The first tells of the rise of Clare, from its humble beginnings as an 1820s Boston soap shop to transnational corporation. At the very end of the book we reach the stage of organisational development Ballard describes in *Super-Cannes*, where the triumph of corporate America is complete and world-wide. The second story examines the life of Laura Bodey, a working mother living in Lacewood, Clare's corporate HQ, who is afflicted with ovarian cancer, a disease apparently caused by the chemicals released by one of Clare's factories. The plots of Clare and the development of capitalism in America, and the development of Laura's cancer run in parallel. Only in the last 50 pages or so, when Laura's cancer is fully developed and Clare emerges from the First World War, do the strands really come together. In telling Clare's story, Powers touches lightly on myriad aspects of American business life over the last 170 years, like the changing fashions of advertising and the history of labour and management. The textual device of inserting a variety of ads works particularly well. They provide a good trace of how Clare, and by extension, other 20<sup>th</sup> century organisations, see their place in the wider society.

### ***We're waging war on the working class***

Not that we want to hurt anyone. Just the opposite. As far as we're concerned, most people have been working too darn long. And we're fighting to change all that...

Class warfare? You bet! And we won't stop fighting until everybody's a member of the leisure class. (animated film, 1963)

(p.329)

### *Breathing Easy*

This year Melissa blew out all her candles. In one breath. By herself. Last year, just humming along while the other kids sang Happy Birthday left her gasping for air. Until Respulín appeared among the rest of her life's presents, each new candle taxed her lungs to the breaking point. She could not run, sing, shout, or even jump a rope. She lived in constant fear. A spring day felt like being buried alive. Melissa turned nine today. Maybe she still can't spell oral leukotriene D4 receptor antagonist. But she does know how to spell Happiness.

#### **The Biological Material Group**

#### **CLARE MATERIALS SOLUTIONS**

(p.116)

A powerful theme that emerges from the book is that the tainted American soil will take revenge for the sins of the exploitative fathers. A theme elaborated to great effect by authors such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, and taken up by various underground bands in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>.

The disenchanted, bright young Director of Holdings, whom many thought was being groomed for bigger things, quit the firm in 1983 to take a position at Harvard Business School. There he made a name for himself with a carefully worked-out theory that American business could work once and only once, with a blank continent in front of it to dispose of (p.337).

Yet, *Gain* is certainly not a simplistic rant against corporate polluters, or even an anti-corporate book, as some readers suggested<sup>3</sup>. The description of the entrepreneurial Clare brothers is engaging and sympathetic. At no stage can one point to a particular individual or event that marks the shift from sympathetic entrepreneurs to evil corporation. *Gain* is ultimately an attempt to come to grips with the modern world and the forces that shaped, and continue to shape, it. Powers shows how the evolution of big business has enhanced our lives in many ways, while exacting a terrible price in other ways. It is a meditation on a particularly American idea of progress. This is not to say that the irony cannot be just as cutting as in Ballard's book at times:

For the war not only proved the impossibility of beating the giant corporations. It showed how much the public good depended upon them... General Motors and Union Carbide saved the world for democracy. Du Pont fired one shell in every five, laundering its windfall millions by expanding into

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2 A particularly powerful example comes from Washington D.C. band Fugazi:

“...bury your heart u s of a  
history rears up to spit in your face  
you saw what you wanted you took what you saw  
we know how you got it – your method equals wipe out  
the end of the frontier and all that you own  
under the blankets of all that you've done  
memory serves us to serve you yet  
memory serves us to never let you wipe out”  
(Fugazi: ‘Smallpox Champion’, from *In on the Kill Taker*, Dischord Records 1993)

3 *Gain* attracted the most scathing individual criticisms of all three books:

“Read like an endless press release written by someone who knew nothing about the reasons why American business is such an immense wealth producing engine.”  
“I find it extraordinary that Powers and other leftists still have 19th century, and in some cases, medieval, views of capitlism (sic), economics and class... Capitlism (sic) is the freedom to pursue your purpose in life. Powers and others have a problem with this.”

paints and polymers... The business of America would never again be anything but business...  
(p.297)

The treatment of Laura Bodey and her family is no less critical/sympathetic than that of Clare. Initially the characters appear pretty two-dimensional (yes, wooden again), and come over as quite pathetic. Only towards the end of the book when Laura succumbs to her illness do the various characters (Laura, her children, her ex-husband) lift themselves out of the banality of their existence. It is as if only in great adversity humanity can shine through. The ending is incredibly moving and perhaps the only stage at which Laura's story pushes the Clare story in the background. This is where the two strands come together, if not at the level of events, then surely at the level of meaning. The book is so carefully crafted that it is inconceivable that this just happens by accident. Over to some of the fans:

In this novel, the conditions of American society enable characters to conceive of great visions and to pursue them with courage and enthusiasm. At the end of the day, however, they cannot escape the banal truth of their existence. Did so many brave, intelligent people labor and die just so that the heroine's teenage son can play video wargames in the comfort of a suburban bedroom? It is troubling, Powers suggests, that all our hopes and strivings should take us no further than this.

Powers is not out to shock, to write page-turners or to wrap you in a web of suspense; rather, the book calls for a simple meditation on how the way we've arrived dictates where we are and where we can go.

Although at a surface level this novel offers the least excesses (no playgroup Nazis or super-wealthy execs playing self-indulgent games), *Gain* ultimately presents the bleakest picture of the books reviewed here. In *The Business* the protagonist manages a fairytale-like escape to a (relatively) untouched country and its (relatively) uncorrupted prince; a chance to make a difference. In *Super-Cannes* the protagonist prepares for a massive shoot-up, a chance to stop (a particular manifestation of) evil in its tracks. In *Gain* there is nothing to do. The victimiser is not so much a corporate evildoer as it is humanity itself. Self-destruction may be inherent in the human condition Powers seems to hint: "People want everything. That's their problem", Laura Bodey announces from her deathbed. The following reflection on the degree of implication in our own predicament gives a flavour of the power and eloquence of Power's prose.

She vows a consumer boycott, a full spring cleaning... Her vow is hopeless. Too many to purge them all. Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count... Who told them to make all these things? But she knows the answer to that one. They've counted every receipt, more carefully than she ever has. And wasn't she born wanting what they were born wanting to give her? Every thought, every pleasure, freed up by these little simplicities, the most obvious of them already worlds beyond her competence... She cannot sue the company for raiding her house. She brought them in, by choice, toted them in a shopping bag. And she'd do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to.  
(p.304)

## Implications?

We now have reached the point where the canon of organisation studies traditionally requires us to formulate an answer to the perennial question: What are the implications for practice? I have no problem with this, although in addressing the question I may need to

shift its implied meaning. The fundamental, if somewhat implicit, point of this review concerns the importance of narrative fiction in understanding organisation and management. It is a point I have elaborated on extensively elsewhere (De Cock, 2000; De Cock, 2001) and which has been the subject of two academic books (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Knights and Willmott, 1999). Whilst I find myself in broad agreement with their editorial/authorial intention to shed light on the blindspots produced by the professional-scientific way of viewing organisational realities, I have some reservations about the facility with which the novels discussed in these books are passed through the lens of organisation theory. For example, Knights and Willmott suggest that:

Lodge takes full advantage of his licence as a novelist to condense a variety of experiences, which he translates into a dramatic narrative, [thus opening a space] for ways of making sense of work... that were previously excluded because they were considered alien and therefore irrelevant for the study of management. (1999: 8-9)

But the strong interpretation these authors supply<sup>4</sup>, which admittedly may work very well in a teaching context, dilutes the impact (the ‘condensed experience’, the alternative representation) of the novel. It sanitises that which should be left ‘raw’. Ultimately it is not the message – “What does the author ‘really’ have in mind? What principles does this text exemplify?” – but the considerations the readers assemble in the course of reading that should be of primary interest. Distracting, agitating, emotionally moving the reader, rather than rejecting or confirming particular theoretical points; therein lies the true value of reading narrative fiction on organisation and management. As Knights and Willmott acknowledge:

“For in order to have any impact at all, the break with convention often has to be exaggerated, polemical or controversial.” (1999: 14)

It is precisely the parodic, polemical, controversial, and sometimes savage, nature of the books reviewed here that makes them so important.

In my stumbling attempt to answer the “So what?” question, Rorty’s work on the importance of the novel proved inspirational. In his *Philosophical Papers*, Rorty (1991, 1998) outlined three ways in which literature can better address the problems of the West than philosophy (and by extension, organisation theory) can: first it is better able to genuinely illustrate diversity and plurality by re-description; second, it can employ a variety of narrative techniques which are more instructive than philosophical reasoning, e.g. it can use irony and ridicule to cut through the proliferation of theory we are all bogged down in; and third and most importantly, using narrative detail can evoke sympathy for the suffering of others and awaken in us a realisation of our own potential for cruelty and the desirability of solidarity. On all three counts our novels score highly. The business landscapes they portray are genuinely different from the ones we are used to in both the popular business press and academic organisational texts. *Gain*, *The Business* and *Super-Cannes* are superbly written, demonstrating a variety of narrative techniques; as for moments of irony, they cover the full spectrum of mild satire to vicious cynicism. It is in

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4 In the case of *Management Lives* (Knights and Willmott, 1999) the four concepts of identity, insecurity, power and inequality channel the reader’s sensemaking.

these ironic/parodic instances that we are made most aware of our potential for cruelty (details about what sorts of cruelty we are capable of feature most prominently in *Super-Cannes*, but also to a significant extent in the two other books). The three novels reviewed demonstrate how much can be said about business when we turn to texts that are not bound to conventional social scientific or media requirements in their ways of interpreting the world. They offer us business activities as a way of illuminating the human condition, no mean feat. But these novels are not written to put the reader in an actional or policymaking frame of mind. In many ways they exemplify Peter Sloterdijk's (1991) critique of the kinetics of our time; a critique that can never provide a theoretical conscience for a practice. The result of such a critique is that actual processes are described in such a way that initially there is 'nothing to do', precisely because we are so deeply implicated in and defined by these processes. It only encourages to take a step back, perceive better, hesitate, stop doing what has always been done. Anything else will perpetuate and amplify our current predicaments, however beautiful the action slogans may sound.

In a piece where I have reflected on so much powerful prose, it is perhaps fitting to end with an eloquent, if rather polemical, quote:

[We should] realize how little theoretical reflection is likely to help us with our current problems... Once we have criticized all the self-deceptive sophistry, and exposed all the false 'self-consciousness', the result of our efforts is to find ourselves just where our grandfathers suspected we were: in the midst of a struggle for power between those who currently possess it... and those who are starving or terrorized because they lack it. Neither twentieth century Marxism, nor analytical philosophy, nor post-Nietzschean 'continental' philosophy has done anything to clarify this struggle... The horrors peculiar to this century... are no better describable with the help of more recent philosophy than with the vocabulary used by our grandfathers. (Rorty, 1991: 25-26)

[W]hen you weigh the good and the bad social novelists have done against the good and the bad the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories. (Rorty, 1991: 80)

Rorty certainly would agree that Banks, Ballard and Powers have redressed the balance a little.

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#### **the author**

Christian De Cock is lecturer in organisation studies and director of the full-time MBA programme at Exeter University. He received his MSc. and his Ph.D. degrees from the Manchester Business School. Prior to joining Exeter University he worked as a research fellow at Manchester Business School and as a lecturer at the University of London. He is associate editor of the journal *Creativity and Innovation Management* and his research has appeared in such journals as *Asia Pacific Business Review*, *Interfaces*, *Omega*, *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Journal of Management Inquiry*. He is currently conducting research on organisational creativity, organisational storytelling, and the e-commerce phenomenon.

Address: University of Exeter, School of Business and Economics, Exeter, EX4 4PU, UK

Email: c.de-cock@exeter.ac.uk

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