The Masochistic Reflexive Turn*

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abstract

In this paper we explore two opposing ways of organizing work. The first relates to (neo-) normative cultures based on the communication of normative ideals. The second involves a radically different form of culture following from what we term the 'masochistic reflexive' turn, in and by which cultural transgressions and perversions are encouraged. In order to provide a thick description of each of these cultural forms we draw on two contrasting examples: Google and a London based consulting firm. These empirical discussions are then theoretically problematized and articulated through conceptualizations of the symptom in the works of both Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. Based on these readings we distinguish (neo-) normative cultures as those that attempt to domesticate the symptom, from masochist reflexive organizations that encourage their employees to enjoy their symptom.

It certainly goes without saying that organizations venture to provide an environment that realizes an optimal amount of productivity. In order to render such ambitions achievable we encounter quite different managerial strategies, each offering or forging a unique presentation of life within the organization. Indeed, organizations, primarily as they appear in the West, are rarely conceived as a simple bureaucratic work-space, in which employees spend eight hours a day, conducting their duties. They are usually considered to be something more, something else. By crafting sophisticated and insidious cultural programmes, organizations have produced and maintained a dizzying array of identities. They have articulated normative frameworks, often with alluring and romantic overtones, through which their values, beliefs and norms can be conveyed (see Abrahamson, 1997; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Ray, 1986).

However, it has been suggested that these normative control approaches have increasingly lost their bite (Adler, 2001; Kunda, 2004; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). They often rely on rigid templates which employees are not naturally inclined to adopt, let alone internalize. This deficiency does not suggest, however, that normative control has become obsolete. Rather it indicates that normative approaches have instead taken on subtler forms (Bains, 2007; Jermier, 1998), appealing to employees 'as they really are', which is sought to be captured in the concept of the 'neo-normative organization' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2007). It points to a new strategy for gaining ascendancy over

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employees, in which 'front stage' corporate selves are substituted by authentic selves, predicated on a culturally validated norm of difference (*ibid*.).

In this study we take Google as an example of how a neo-normative approach is employed that engages a norm of difference. We show how this organization, in addition to celebrating differences and idealizing individuality, offers a whole arsenal of features in order to secure the physical and emotional well-being of their employees (Vise and Malseed, 2005). Sports and food have become essential elements of the Google culture, and these activities are deliberately used as a means to create the impression among employees of not being at work.

However, while neo-normative control perspectives have only begun to spread their seed across the world of organizations, we can nevertheless locate a counter-movement. Far from trying to lull their employees into comfortable and imaginary worlds, certain organizations take the opposite tack: they make a proud case of not providing security, meaning or happiness to their employees. Instead, they offer high salaries and a reflexive organizational culture, perceived to resonate better with the 'harsh reality' in which they operate. The employees of these organizations are not only allowed to openly despise their occupation, but they are even compelled to exhibit this disdain in order to fit in. What this form of corporate culture brings to the employees is an injunction to be reflexive and masochistic. To capture this imperative we use the term 'masochistic reflexive turn'. This term indicates that at the same time as the employees are well aware of their misfortunate situation, they derive some form of enjoyment from it. The term masochism has a long history, stemming from the writing of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Marquis de Sade but coined, as well as translated into a medical vocabulary, by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. We will not be offering a thorough account of the dynamics of masochism in this paper. Instead we adopt the word in its most straightforward mode, simply taking masochism to mean "a perversion that is premised on a wish to suffer pain, humiliation, and even torture" (ten Bos, 2007: 545).

The purpose of this paper is to empirically illustrate and theoretically articulate the difference between organizations that employ normative and neo-normative control on the one hand, and the masochistic reflexive organization on the other. To this end we turn to the psychoanalytic notion of the symptom, arguing that organizations of the former kind relate to the symptom as something requiring domestication, such that potentially undesirable expressions that threaten to harm their corporate culture are managed, minimized, marginalized. This orientation to the symptom is rather conventional and indeed culturally ubiquitous. It relies on the rather obvious assumption that an organization, in order to render itself competitive and profitable, requires a workforce exempted from the contingencies of life: fiercely and exclusively committed, spared from severe illness, etc. For if the attention of the employees were entirely occupied by their own symptoms – such as physical or mental sickness, stress, burnout, injuries, or any other form of time-consuming self-pity – it would quite naturally run counter to the aim and mission of the competitive organization.

The masochistic reflexive organization, in contrast, attempts neither to prevent nor to 'repress' the symptom. Neither does this particular strategy attempt to secure the well-being of their employees, quite to the contrary, it calls on the employees to identify with

– and enjoy – their symptoms. These organizations exhibit loyalty to a perverted form of the Lacanian maxim: Enjoy your Symptom (to borrow the title from Žižek, 1992), in which the symptom is not figured as a deviant sign of illness *to be fought*, but rather as a manifestation faithful to the pervasive structures of capitalist society and thus *to be cherished*. In order to illustrate these two opposing relations toward the symptom we draw on two examples: Google and a London based consultancy firm that we refer to as Leo Ebing.

Encapsulating the Employee: Inside the Googleplex

It is usually believed that any company that wishes to be perceived as a progressive force in the New Economy has to take seriously issues related to the well-being of its employees. This may involve more standard measures such as providing medical coverage for employees and maintaining safe working conditions. But it may also include initiatives which attempt to secure the loyalty and commitment of its employees. This latter endeavour – to create the committed and reliable employee – is undoubtedly becoming more and more prevalent. It is manifested by a series of organizational interventions that include spiritualism (Bell and Taylor, 2004; Forray and Stork, 2002) and the creation of strong identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Roberts, 2005).

The systematic moulding of employees' attitudes and behaviours, through which an organization takes a deliberate and active part in advancing its employees' awareness of health and good moral conduct, goes back at least as far as 1914, when the *Ford Motor Company's Sociology Department* began its operation (Hooker, 1997). The inspectors of this programme, all of whom were good Ford men, searched for employees able to exhibit or demonstrate thrift, good habits, and good home conditions. The inspectors went so far in their search as to intervene "in the private lives of their workers to ensure they were living suitably stable and puritanical lifestyles" (McGillivray, 2005: 129).

The standards articulated and set forth by Ford aimed at conforming to a unitary identity. It was a rather straightforward strategy in which employees were expected to fully obey the rules and conducts promoted by the organization. This strategy, albeit somewhat blunt, points to a control perspective which not only draws on instrumental and coercive control techniques but to a greater extent relies on a particularly subtle form of normative control that makes employees in some sense complicit in exercising the mechanisms of their own control. These mechanisms function by enjoining employees to internalize the values and attitudes of a corporation as if they were the employees' very own (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Etzioni, 1964). If conventional, 'openly' normative techniques for exercising control typified Ford's era of organizational management, control mechanisms operative in contemporary work-life are ultimately more sophisticated and insidious (Jermier, 1998). The accent is no longer placed on a rigid model which promotes the idealized employee, but on a model that takes a more 'genuine' interest in the employee as idiosyncratic and individual (Fleming and Sturdy, 2007). This insidious form of control, which is disguised as a vehicle for securing or insuring each employee's happiness and individual freedom, is closely

associated to the subtle forms of health regulations that are being employed by organizations. As McGillivray points out,

> [T]here has been a subsequent shift in emphasis from direct, openly paternalistic and collective forms of organizational intervention towards more subtle techniques which target the health status of the working body. Instead of the designated Fordist inspectors visiting the homes of workers to monitor compliance with puritanical discourses, contemporary medicalised notions of organizational wellness appear to constitute each worker as his or her own inspector. (2005: 135)

An emancipatory ideal and the prospect of happiness are often tied to the image of the healthy, sound and happy employee. The maxim of the model employee in any of these organizations could be formulated as: 'Fitter, Happier, More Productive' (to borrow the title from McGillivray, 2005).

Indeed, few would deny the importance of health and it is no doubt increasingly conceived as the royal road to a prosperous and happy life. Thus organizations that provide appealing and generous health services to their employees are typically seen as heroic figures, shaping an era in which corporations truly wish and strive to prolong human life. But can not the same organizations also be interpreted as unscrupulous 'ideological machines' that, by co-opting the category of *health* and incorporating it into their ideological apparatus, become even more masterful in their endeavour to govern and regulate identities? Kelly, Allender and Colquhoun have demonstrated how a large IT firm, by promoting the image of a corporate athlete, produce a "work-place identity, an ensemble of behaviours and dispositions which employees… are encouraged, *freely*, to embrace" (2007: 281). In a similar manner, Zoller (2003) demonstrates that the promotion of health in an automobile manufacturing plant was in fact ultimately predicated on managerialist values. What these accounts point to is how health has become a vital aspect to be included in managerial ideology.

The increasing organizational interest in health within corporate culture is not at all surprising given that organizations' perceived power of attraction is popularly gauged with consideration to their health programmes. For example, in order to score high on the '100 Best Companies to Work For[®] list' (published annually in *Fortune*), it is key to 'invest' in the management of health issues and to draft workplace policies that stridently reflect the extent of that investment. The 2007 winner, Google, fits neatly into this picture: Fortune's website depicts them as providing "free meals, swimming spa, and free doctors onsite" (100 Best Companies to Work For, 2007).

While Google has become one of the most sought-after employers, it is possibly the organization *par excellence* that has successfully obliterated any thick distinction between private and professional identity. In their crusade for better working conditions, and in the spirit of their corporate motto, "Don't Be Evil" (Vise and Malseed, 2005: 4), Google has developed a cultural programme of identification so strong that the image of the model employee and the expression of individual identity go hand in glove.

In 2006, Google paid Silicon Graphics $319 million for the property that has become the capital manifestation of Google's enviable corporate culture: the Googleplex. With four buildings totalising 47,038m² Google has designed a complex of homeliness. With

its numerous cafés, gyms, and other exciting facilities designed for recreational activities – the Googleplex invites its employees to enjoy themselves not simply *as Google employees* but even more forcefully, *as who they are*. Aside from onsite doctors and other health-related amenities, the most appreciated privilege among Googlers is free meals (Vise and Malseed, 2005). This feature of the Googleplex was born out of the employment of Charlie Ayers, a famous cook who prior to joining Google serviced the Grateful Dead. This bonus, however, was not without an ulterior motive.

> It was a perk with a purpose. It would keep people near one another and their desks; prevent them from developing poor eating habits that would diminish productivity; eliminate the time they would otherwise spend going out to lunch and worrying over plans; and create a sense of togetherness. (Vise and Malseed, 2005: 194)

Food and entertainment became central for the exertion of Google's cultural power. The goal of this perk, as Ayers explains, "was to create the illusion you were not at work but on some type of cruise and resort" (Vise and Malseed, 2005: 197). It was used, among other things, for ushering in new employees, so called 'Nooglers', who were given their first real Google-experience at the strictly social Friday event, TGIF. They were introduced to other Googlers and sat down to drink beer, eat delicious snacks and listen to music. The prevailing atmosphere at these events was described by Charlie in the following way.

> There was electricity in the air. Everyone was on fire. As soon as you walked in, you were hit with this onslaught of colors, lava lamps, people riding around on scooters in the hallway, things you didn't see anywhere else. People had their dogs at work. You walked in and looked around and people wondered, 'What kind of place is this?' It was like an extension of Stanford in a lot of ways. (Vise and Malseed, 2005: 197)

By creating the impression of not being at work, and by encouraging identification with a culture based on the prolongation of university campus life, Google has rid themselves of most accusations normally held against most organizations' normative control programmes (well illustrated by the fact that they are widely considered the most attractive employer). This successful turn could be explained by their appeal to authenticity: rather than promoting a standard template to which employees are expected to converge, Google allows its employees 'to be themselves' (see Fleming and Sturdy, 2007). Moreover, the Google spirit privileges the category of 'the hobby' to that of 'work'; their corporate website claims that the only conditions for becoming a Googler are "an obsessive commitment to creating search perfection and having a great time doing it" (Google Corporate Information, 2007). The ability to 'immerse oneself' into one's own hobby, while at the same time being free to express one's own (as opposed to the employer's) 'true' beliefs and attitudes, appears to manifest the emancipatory potential of contemporary organizations. But despite the enchanting vocabulary of 'freedom' and 'emancipation' on which the neo-normative control culture draws, such 'possibilities' do not actually liberate the employee, but rather create new forms of identity control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2007). This seemingly emancipatory development could perhaps equally be appreciated as something of a more sinister artifice. As Žižek describes:

> They are under the injunction to be what they are, to follow their innermost idiosyncrasies, allowed to ignore social norms of dress and behaviours (they obey only some elementary rules of

polite tolerance of each other's idiosyncrasies), they thus seem to realize a kind of proto-Socialist utopia of overcoming the opposition between alienated business, where you earn money, and the private hobby-activity that you pursue for pleasure at weekends. In a way, their job is their hobby, which is why they spend long hours at weekends in their workplace behind the computer screen. When one is paid for indulging in one's hobby, the result is that one is exposed to a superego pressure incomparably stronger than that of the good old 'Protestant work ethic'. (Žižek, 1999: 368)

From this perspective, the Googler is in no way 'freed' from superegoic pressure but, on the contrary, under the sway of an even more insidious species of normative control. But unlike traditional normative control, the injunction is not to adapt to a corporate ideal, which would sustain the notion of incommensurability between the employee's innermost private desires and those of an oppressive institution, but rather the injunction is to simply 'be yourself'. This form of neo-normative control instils and celebrates a 'norm of difference' whereby the employee is encouraged to be idiosyncratic, individual, 'edgy', and emboldened to resist the 'temptations' of being normal.

Furthermore, the injunction to 'be yourself' precipitates the indistinction between working-self and authentic-self to an even greater degree than do normative control systems. Its blend of work and recreation – an intermixture of fun and seriousness – disintegrates *Homo faber* (the working man) to allow for *Homo ludens* (the playing man). The formula of the neo-normative perspective is that work should not be considered as a necessary evil that one is forced into, but as a hobby that one pursues and which expresses the radical 'edge' of oneself. As Žižek notes:

[W]hat the superego injunction of a postmodern corporation like Microsoft targets is precisely this core of my idiosyncratic creativity – I become useless for them the moment I start losing this 'imp of perversity', the moment I lose my 'counter-cultural' subversive edge and start to behave like a 'normal' mature subject. What we are dealing with here is thus a strange alliance between the rebellious subversive core of my personality, my 'imp of perversity', and the external corporation. (1999: 368-9)

According to the standards of the 'postmodern' corporation the model employee expresses his deviant and idiosyncratic nature. He or she refuses to grow up and attempts to uphold the virtual illusion of an everlasting childhood. "Witold Gombrowicz and many of his contemporaries", Paul Virilio writes, "noted that the mark of modernity was not growth or human progress, but rather the refusal to grow up" (2000: 94).

'Immaturity and infantilism are the most effective categories for defining modern man,' Gombrowicz wrote. After the telescopic metamorphoses of Alice, we had reached the Peter Pan stage – the stage of the child stubbornly determined to escape his future. (*ibid.*)

The final aspect that needs be added to the logic of neo-normative control is that of infantilization. Pretending not to be at work 'but on some type of cruise and resort' and to drive scooters indoors, seems to correspond well with Virilio's Peter Pan world and Žižek's 'imp of perversion'. To take it one step further it may be suggested that by developing a cultural identity predicated on a postmodern norm of difference, in which employees are pushed to exhibit their 'rebellious subversive core', the organization becomes an infantilizing milieu. It sets forth a fantasy-world that encapsulates and comforts the employee and at the same time protects it from the mean and ruthless

world of capitalism. Yet another illustration, testifying to this logic, is that Google have installed a replica of SpaceShipOne and a dinosaur skeleton in the Googleplex.

Gimping at Leo Ebing

Far from Google and what might be said to be a promotion of something like the Peter Pan world of never-neverland, we find a London based consulting firm, which we will refer to as Leo Ebing for purposes of confidentiality. If Google represents the optimistic view that inner desires and employees' idiosyncrasies can be married with work, Leo Ebing represents the opposite – work is *not* the royal road to emancipation, but rather a necessary evil, a *sine qua non*, for dwelling in a capitalistic world. Rather than preventing illness by providing a healthy work environment within the Googleplex etc., Leo Ebing illustrates the counter-strategy of actually incorporating illness as an element acknowledged as inextricably embedded within the very nature of their operations.

Leo Ebing is a high profile consultancy firm operating in London. But in contrast to many of their competitors, which often rank high on the '100 best companies to work for' list (BCG, KPMG, and Ernst and Young are all included), Leo Ebing does not provide any perks for their employees. Instead they provide high salaries and generous bonuses.

This is not to suggest, however, that Leo Ebing utilizes no incentives aside from financial benefits. Indeed, they offer something else – they offer reflexivity. As an employee of this firm one is not compelled to believe or make illusions. On the contrary, as our interview indicates it becomes difficult to make a career in the firm if one does not acquire a 'healthy' dose of self-hatred and subscribe to a corporate cynicism. Those who enter the organization and identify too much with their occupation, not buying into the corporate cynicism, are often considered less intelligent and subject to mockery.

In this section we offer an empirical vignette, the basis of which being a number of interviews conducted with a senior consultant at Leo Ebing who we will call Casper. Casper is in his late twenties and has in the course of the last four years, smoothly and rapidly climbed the corporate career ladder. At the time of the interview he was considered a member of the 'management side' of the firm. Leo Ebing has no clear 'official' demarcation between management and employees, but given that Casper both leads major projects and partakes in the recruitment process, he would fall into the former of these categories.

Employing the vignette style of data presentation imposes clear limits to generalizability (see Costas and Fleming, 2007; Thomas and Davies, 2005). And while Casper's accounts are in fact expressions of his own personal experiences, they should not be regarded as marginalized or odd. The present authors have met and spent time with five other Leo Ebing employees and their reflections correspond, by and large, with those of Casper's.

The accounts that follow are by no means encouraging or cheerful. Casper makes no secret of the fact that he despises his job. He even goes as far as to suggest that his relation to Leo Ebing is based on a mutual denial of the other as subject. He explains his view of the firm:

> I see it as a loosely tied together congregation of people who don't really like what they do but are united in terms of their purposes. They need to stay there for a certain amount of time because the incentive structure is built in such a way that you will earn an optimal amount of money through staying in the firm. Most employees have an exit strategy, but consent to staying for maybe 7 or 8 years, and that incentive system is the sole reason why I stay there or why other people stay there. But we don't really have feelings towards our organization, only towards our work which we of course hate.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Google and Leo Ebing is that the latter makes no attempt to produce a strong corporate culture to which employees could relate. In clear contrast to the Googlian ambition of creating an alluring corporate culture that ventures to pamper employees into complacency, Casper describes a radically opposed picture: when asked if Leo Ebing's corporate culture expressed concern for employees' wellbeing, Casper responds: 'No, not in the slightest bit. It's almost to the contrary'.

In this respect it seems as though the only cultural incentive for working at Leo Ebing is an individualistic and 'rational' desire to gain money – but this is not the full story. Out of the deliberate attempt to ignore organizational identity regulations and creations of strong corporate cultures is borne a parallel, more informally based, culture. As Casper explains:

> There is almost like this latent culture has been created whereby we pull jokes and make fun of the fact that we are being exploited by our company. So you might call it a cynical project but it revolves around the fact that we… try and alleviate our sensation of being exploited, the fact that we have to work 80 to 90 hours per week, sometimes 100 hours per week. It becomes important to try to alleviate the feeling of being exploited by pulling jokes about it. Basically saying stuff like you know, 'My life is shit… but you know… what the hell'. I'm still allowed to direct criticism against the firm. It's a very free environment in that sense.

A compelling example of this masochistic bent concerns the distribution and reception of a corporate e-mail comparing consultants with prostitutes. This e-mail contained 26 points, each of which would allegedly apply to both consultants and prostitutes. For example, 'You are not proud of what you do'; 'It is difficult to have a family'; 'Your pimp encourages drinking and you become addicted to drugs to ease the pain'. This e-mail was not spread behind the back of management. In fact, it was addressed to senior and junior consultants alike. Casper's own response to this e-mail was positive. He thought that some of the points were apt descriptions of his work-life.

> There are some that stuck very well, because they fit perfectly to how we feel in our firm, 'you're not proud of what you do' – I'm not proud of what I do. I know that it's not a meaningful job. I don't really give more to society than what I take back, I don't nurture any personal interest in what I do for a living –on the contrary, I despise it. I can't respect myself for what I do in the slightest.

This e-mail shows how masochism is closely related to humour, self-mockery and cynicism. As ten Bos argues: "[h]umour is the masochist option: by gladly submitting

yourself to the laws and rules of the organization where you work, you show nothing less than humorous contempt for the world you find yourself in" (2007: 551). But this e-mail, even though it would be considered an extreme breach of political correctness at most organizations, is rather mild in comparison to other masochistic expressions at Leo Ebing. One such example was how junior consultants, in particular newcomers, were labelled 'gimps'. The meaning of this word was new to Casper.

> This is a word I'd never come across before, but if you have seen *Pulp Fiction*, the line 'bring out the gimp' alludes to a person who is a human being, but who is treated as a subhuman species, almost like an animal. He's really situated at the lowest rung of the food chain, a non-person that you don't care about; he's dressed in leather, some form of erotic attire to further emphasize his subjugation. They bring him out of a cage to fulfil lots of seedy purposes. As a project manager you often talk about newly employed like 'those are my gimps', meaning they are used to carry out lots of mindless, boring tasks – often working more than hundred hours a week. And they will say the same, like you know, 'I'm just gimping right now'. It has become a verb, carrying a specific and precise meaning that is well understood by all employees. A typical conversation between new employees could go something like this: what are you doing right know? – 'I'm gimping away'.

Gimping, pimping, and to whore have become salient metaphorical verbs frequently used for describing the professional activities at Leo Ebing. While the use of these rather obscene words would be banned, or at least undesired, in most organizations, Leo Ebing makes no gesture to improve their political correctness – quite the contrary: working for Leo Ebing should not be associated with attaining happiness or staying healthy. They neither offer nor organize any extracurricular activities which would aim to create a stronger sense of belonging. Nor do they provide gym cards or the opportunity to participate in physical and/or recreational activities such as sports. They simply encourage a more or less hedonistic way of living, in which the consumption of fatty food and alcohol is integral. In Casper's own words:

> As anecdotal information, when I joined the company I gained 10 kilos over 5 weeks, so that's 2 kilos per week in body fat. This is of course extreme, but it is one of the compensations that we can indulge freely in our firm. We can expense late-night dinners and lots of alcohol, and the extent to which we would do this is informally very much encouraged. On my first project we went out on expensive dinners every night and had lots of drinks and alcohol. A further piece of the puzzle is that, after you work 16 or 17 hours a day, paradoxically when you come home you can't get any sleep. Even though you might feel extremely tired, your mind is going around overtime, the synapses are firing away without cessation, short-circuited if you wish. Thoughts keep turning in your head without being able to stop. So after a couple of days, I said I'm unable to fall a sleep, and my colleagues said – well the best trick is when you come home, that is to the hotel of course, go over to the minibar and pull out all those little whisky bottles and then down them in one go. That usually helps. So drinking, even alcoholism, is very much encouraged in the company. Remember this is after having been out on dinner drinking, probably half a bottle of wine, aperitifs, and maybe an avec to the coffee. We are usually quite drunk when we try to sleep anyway, they were encouraging me to then down those whisky bottles on top of that, to drown the senses and doze off.

Against the gloomy canvas that Casper paints, it is difficult to comprehend the charm of working, or gimping, for a non-subject such as Leo Ebing. However, he points to two advantages. The first is that Leo Ebing allows for a separation between the private and the corporate self. He refers to organizations with strong cultural programmes, such as Google, as being even worse off in that they attempt to enmesh the private self with the

company self. But in spite of Casper's claim, Leo Ebing's distinction between the private and corporate spheres remains in fact hypothetical or, by and large, illusory.

> When you join the organization, you basically tell yourself that you will maintain a distinction between the professional self and the private, and I'm allowed to privately hate myself for what I do as a professional, it's ok, I don't have to pretend I like it. But still I've signed a contract in a way, meaning that in order to be able to feel that, I have to work my ass off. And to some extent, after a while you realise that the separation of the professional and private is an illusion. This private part which has been sacred and secure from any corporate interest, that kind of illusion soon dies away because you realise that you spend at least 80-90 hours per week at work so you don't have any time anyway to enjoy the fact that you maintained a private identity unaffected by the corporate culture. The only time I have free is for sleep, so why do I even care about the illusion of my private self, what's the point of it if I never have time to manifest it… I just work.

The second advantage is that out of the miasma of total cynicism emanates a form of enjoyment that Casper refers to as a 'surreal perverse enjoyment'. This sensation he describes in the following manner:

> It never feels like a positive feeling, it always feels like shit but it's the same with some form of really perverted pleasure, I personally have never done anything that really perverted, that I felt very bad about after… But I can just imagine if I were to obtain sexual satisfaction from having sex with corpses or something like that, I reckon I would feel quite bad about it. Like if I were to perform an act, something utterly tabooed in society; the kind of feeling I'd be most likely to feel afterwards, after I've ejaculated and had my initial sense of pleasure, afterwards I imagine you just feel this kind of emptiness, in association with some form of guilt. Like I've done something that is forbidden and that I shouldn't have done because it was futile and pointless anyway, and I just feel dirty. That kind of feeling, the emptiness, that it was completely pointless, why did I do it, and also it just feels wrong, that kind of feeling is what I feel like the whole time I'm at work.

It follows then that when pressed, Casper actually considers both of these supposed advantages as false: the first is merely illusory, the second is perverse. We tease out at least two salient points from these confessions. The first of these is a great degree of reflexivity and how this trait renders possible the opportunity of freely expressing oneself. This 'freedom' clearly sets Leo Ebing apart from corporations employing normative or neo-normative forms of cultural control in that the former gives free rein to expressing ones discontent. Indeed, it is of great importance to Casper that his employer does not try to conceal its 'inherently' unethical and perverse nature.

The second salient point, intimately linked to the first, is a masochistic undercurrent to Casper's confession. In freely expressing oneself (with any honesty), one is forced to exhibit some masochistic tendencies, such as hating oneself, hating one's job and so on. In this respect it is not so much that the employees are 'free' to express their self-hatred, but rather that they are compelled to do so. What this amounts to, then, is that Leo Ebing, far from being freed from ideology, utilizes an ideology in which reflexivity and masochism are integral. A revealing example of this is how Casper, together with a few colleagues, ridiculed another 'duped' colleague, who identified with his professional role.

> I mean there is this Danish guy who really appears to appreciate what he does, and I would totally make fun of him, like – how can you really believe that you are doing something even remotely meaningful, for the economy and society. Its really ludicrous, The only reason why we are here on this project is because some guy in senior management has a personal relationship with another guy in the senior management of this firm, and they decided over a bottle of expensive wine that

> the other guy would pay out from the corporate budget to send over a few gimps, print out some overheads and do some meaningless work, and he was forced to agree. I guess he felt a bit nervous since the sheer act of agreeing to that fact, disturbs his whole worldview. His identity as a consultant was a little shattered, he felt uncomfortable about having chosen a lifestyle that is meaningless… and utterly cynical. But he privately couldn't really accept this fact, so he would outwardly agree and joke about it but you could feel he privately continued believing what he did; you know that we *add value* as consultants and such crap. But this kind of guy is a minority in the organization, there are very few who really believe in what they do. Also, they are constantly being ridiculed, to the point of harassment, so in the end they typically leave out of free will and start working for one of our competitors. They are also the kind of people who won't get anywhere in our organization, most of them have been around for ages without even the slightest hint of a promotion. Because the directors in the company don't really feel that they are of the right calibre, you need a certain dose of cynicism and distance to what you do in order to succeed in the firm.

What Casper's account points to more than anything is an encouragement to indulge in the vulgarity or the triteness perceived as inherent to their line of work, and furthermore that this very dwelling on such vulgarity nonetheless renders upon employees a sense of gratification. To embrace as a source of pleasure an evaluative disposition, normally considered crass or misanthropic – if not a sign of illness, cannot be considered anything short of perversion. Consultants seem to organize their own self-humiliation, or better still, they seem to organize their transgressions of the norm that caring about oneself matters. By putting themselves in harms way and reflecting upon these transgressions, they seem to receive a perverse satisfaction in the defiance of the common norm of self-preservation.

The Lacanian Symptom: From Meaning to Enjoyment

Thus far we have painted two contrasting canvasses of how organizations relate to normative ideals and transgressions. The richness of the cases prevents any reductionistic or simplistic theoretical explanation. The purpose of having fleshed out a detailed and thick description of these cases has been to display the complex and, at times, contradictory nature of our two broad categories. This means that we have no intention to reduce the empirical richness of the cases to any subsumptive causal explanations, such as the theoretical notion of the symptom (by either domesticating it, or cherishing it). However, by juxtaposing the cases and theoretically articulating some theoretical logics, we attempt to go beyond a radical hermeneutic approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

This comparative analysis, we assert, is possible for at least two reasons. First, they all exhibit a minimal strategic deliberation in that each cultural program is specifically crafted to harness the affective side of identification. This means that we are not merely dealing with arbitrary control perspectives, accidentally present at the respective sites. The second reason as to why a comparative analysis would be possible is that each culture is a distinct response, articulated by way of dissociating oneself from something obsolete or oppressive. At Google it is a response to the rigid normative templates that fail to respect the individual as he or she really is. At Leo Ebing we witness a response against infantilization, a reaction against the belief that work can bring about a full identity, such that the employee can become him or herself (as at Google).

We would thus like to make clear that the theoretical discussion, being the focus of this latter part of the paper, is a tentative approach that aims to provide an initial articulation of the empirical problematization. In other words, we have given precedence to our empirical exposition so that no theoretical interpretation, including our own, should be taken as a given.

By reading these examples against the Lacanian notion of the symptom we aim to contribute to the overall discussion of control. More specifically, taking the symptom as our central explanatory category brings a number of commonly downplayed issues to the surface, including affect, enjoyment, suffering and fantasy.

Before we go into detail of how the symptom is situated in each of these cultures, let us first give a short description of how they, in our view, differ. In short, it may be said that the first of these organizing principles – and here we refer most notably to Google – aim to secure commitment by offering an ideal premised on the social respect and recognition of individual difference. This means that employees are encouraged to 'be themselves' and to exhibit a 'radical edge'. The second organizing principle, which stands in stark contrast to the first, tries to secure commitment by offering reflexivity and a paradoxical form of masochistic enjoyment. In firms which would apply to this latter logic, employees are not only allowed to direct criticism against their employer but are in fact compelled to wage such criticism. In this respect they are ushered into a culture in which the mandated expression of mutual self-respect and mutual dignity is banned.

The remaining part of this paper aims to theoretically capture the difference between these two cultures. While we acknowledge significant differences within each of these categories, we argue that they may be separable through distinct respective orientations towards the symptom. More specifically, we suggest that while corporate cultures rely on normative and neo-normative mechanisms of control aim to domesticate or 'gentrify' the symptom, organizations whose mechanisms evince what we have called the 'masochistic reflexive' turn, such as Leo Ebing, offer a culture in which the injunction is to 'enjoy the symptom'.

In order to flesh out our argument, we turn to Jacques Lacan and readings of his work developed by Slavoj Žižek. In his account we find a conceptualization of the symptom that greatly differs from those proffered by traditional medicine and the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud.

By combining Freud's discovery of the unconscious with structural linguistics, Lacan sets forth a reading of the symptom that significantly expands its traditional meaning. For Lacan, the symptom does not simply represent a sign of illness. Rather it assumes a more universal character, reflecting fundamental processes of meaning production. In his earlier development of the symptom, during the mid 50's with the publication of 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious', Lacan draws on Roman Jakobson's two polar figures of language: metonymy and metaphor (Jakobson and Halle, 1971: 76), arguing that desire is equated with the former and the symptom with the latter (Lacan, 2006: 439).

If metonymy is associated with combination and contexture, the metaphor is related to selection and substitution (Jakobson and Halle, 1971: 60). In Lacan's adoption of this distinction, considerable focus is put on how chains of significations are either expanded through metonymy or halted and retroactively organized through the metaphor. The metaphor is thereby a key theoretical construct for understanding how the potentially endless formations of signifying chains, without any intrinsic or internal distribution of meaning, become fixed and organized.

The symptom should thus be conceived as *a signifier that enters into the place where the signifying chain breaks down*. Žižek provides a compelling example to help us understand this rather dense formulation in an analysis of anti-Semitism. In his example the Jew is the symptom of fascism – more specifically, the Jew is held responsible for the inherent failure of attempts to establish a coherent meaning around the notion (or signifier) of Fascism. He explains: "The Jew is the means for Fascism, of taking into account, of representing its own impossibility: in its positive presence, it is only the embodiment of the ultimate impossibility of the totalitarian project – of its immanent limit" (Žižek, 1989: 127). The Jew, or more accurately the construction of the Jew, is thus the necessary invention of Fascist discourse by which Fascism becomes able to gloss over its inherent impossibility.

Against this background, one may suggest that the Jew is to Fascism what the gimp is to both Leo Ebing and Google. It is a necessary construct for establishing the corporate cultures of both organizations. It is the image which metaphorically overdetermines the effect of the barren nature of capitalism. But whereas consultants working for Leo Ebing identify with the gimp in claiming that the inevitable condition of work is exploitation and domination, Google denies the gimp in claiming that no asymmetry between the working self and existential inwardness exists or ought to exist.

These opposed orientations towards the symptom are illustrated in numerous ways. For instance, Google's deliberate attempt to create an illusion of not being at work may be seen as an attempt to protect their employees against the darker shades of capitalism. To take it one step further, one may suggest that Google, in order to preserve its uncontaminated culture, has to keep the pernicious gimp at a safe distance. If it fails, the gimp will open up an unbridgeable chasm that exposes as an illusion the very ideology on which the corporate identity is built.

By reading Google's operations alongside their specific orientation to the symptom, we cast a new light (or perhaps a shadow) on their corporate culture. Their obsession with recreational activities, healthy food and numerous sport activities are all illustrations of their tenacious project of keeping the symptom at bay. In short, the smouldering gimp that threatens at any moment to emerge from the ashes must effectively be domesticated.

At Leo Ebing the situation is quite different. Here the gimp, far from being the undesired symptom that must be excluded and concealed, becomes the main image for employee identification. What is perhaps most important in relation to this identification is how the process paradoxically effects a perverse kind of enjoyment, this last feature

illustrating a point which corresponds well with Lacan's later elaboration of the symptom.

Lacan's later development foregrounds the affective aspects of the symptom, arguing that it is a pure *jouissance* directed to no one (Lacan cited in Evans, 1996: 189). In this respect the symptom is conceived as "a real kernel of enjoyment, which persists as a surplus and returns through all attempts to domesticate it, to gentrify it…, to dissolve it by means of explication, of putting-into-words its meaning" (Žižek, 1989: 69). Lacan's re-orientation led him to consider the symptom's possibility for organizing enjoyment. But whenever Lacan speaks of enjoyment, one should not draw the hasty conclusion that enjoyment designates a pure and unproblematic form of pleasure. Instead, for Lacan, enjoyment or *jouissance* must be counterposed to pleasure. These ideas, developed from his reading of Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', rest on the important distinction: that between pleasure, as limited to the functioning of the pleasure principle, and enjoyment, as that which diverges from the command of the pleasure principle. More specifically, pleasure is always bound up with rational calculation – between expected pleasure on the one hand, and expected suffering on the other. *Jouissance*, in contrast, knows no such limits – it contains within itself a radical investment which, quite likely, runs counter to the subject's well-being (Evans, 1996: 92; Fink, 1995: 60). *Jouissance* is in this sense eminently transgressive. It aims to transgress the Law "and introduces an erotics that is above morality" (Lacan, 1992: 84).

Google's strenuous attempts to offer a balanced, healthy and pleasurable life to their employees are indicative of how they refuse to go beyond a certain limit of the pleasure principle. Even though their practices, such as driving scooters in the hallway, exhibit a transgression of some sort, it is nevertheless confined within a wider discourse of controlled pleasure. This means that the alleged 'craziness' at the Googleplex, however extreme it may seem from the outside, is a well attuned strategy that is articulated within the co-ordinates of the pleasure principle. As is evident from our earlier empirical discussion, all perks and activities, even the more seemingly transgressive, are deliberate attempts to create a stronger sense of belonging.

At Leo Ebing, in contrast, we face a very different orientation. By subverting the Googlian proclamation that no contradiction exists between work-identity and existential inwardness, Leo Ebing goes beyond Google in that they transgress the Law all the way, so to speak. It implies a form of reflexive eroticisation in which employees' acts stand in an immediate relation to the obscene underside. In contrast, this close encounter with the obscene underside of domination and exploitation is what the Googlian philosophy tries so persistently to disavow. For Leo Ebing the naked and terrifying encounter is with capitalistic work-relations but unlike the Googlian disavowal, enjoyment is derived from embodying the harsh symbolic space carved out by such an encounter.

But even though it may be suggested that these transgressive organizations display more honest and direct relations to their terrifying or obscene undersides, it is nevertheless the case that these means of incorporating the possible erotic fantasy are based largely on American pop culture (e.g. the gimp from *Pulp Fiction*), which is to say that the encounter has already reserved its place in the space of fantasy (see Žižek, 1989). To

identify with the gimp, or to give free range to perverse assaults, is not necessarily a transgression into something new or unknown, but rather a transgression into a fantasy that is antecedently produced or somehow already available.

But how pervasive are these transgressive organizations? While the practices of Leo Ebing certainly fit this description well, it should still be considered a rare exception in a world where organizations' conventional normative ideals, widely based on the categories of the 'ethical' or 'healthy' employee, still rule. But there certainly exist other movements within our late-capitalist society that indicate the ascent of the masochistic reflexive turn. One such example is the Pro-ana movement who tries to re-articulate the meaning of anorexia, arguing that it should not be considered a suffered illness but rather a volunteered lifestyle. In a similar fashion to what we experience at Leo Ebing, this movement attempts neither to domesticate nor gentrify the obscene underside of society's obsession with the image of the slim young woman, but rather tries to celebrate it. By employing terms such as 'thinspiration' and glorifying the act of starvation, this movement has fashioned the image of the undernourished woman into a prime ideal. Another movement which applies to this logic is the subculture of barebacking (Dean, forthcoming). By calling into question the norm of the 'heterosexual homo', that is, the homosexual allegiant to heterosexual norms of safe-sex practices, a sub-culture emerges in which sex without the use of condoms, perversely imbued with the concomitant risk of catching HIV, is considered a political contestation against the homogenization and domestication of the homosexual man.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored organizations that go beyond normative perspectives of organizing work. These organizations, we have argued, provide a distinct corporate culture in which (neo-) normative perspectives for exerting control are supplanted by the aims of organizational cultures in which perversions and transgressions are encouraged.

In order to theoretically separate these two forms of organizing we have turned to Lacan's conceptualization of the symptom. From this reading we suggest that while organizations that utilize (neo-) normative controls intend to domesticate or 'gentrify' the symptom, organizations that cultivate a masochistic reflexivity induce an enjoyment of the symptom.

In our analysis of (neo-) normative cultures and masochistic reflexive cultures we have suggested that a closer investigation into the complex affairs of affect may shed new light on how control is exercised. However, we have consciously tried to avoid blackboxing the concept of affect, instead trying to disentangle its content. In this regard, we have presented three interrelated concepts: the symptom, pleasure and enjoyment. By having related these concepts to our empirical accounts we have attempted to show how the organization of work is also the organization of affect (pleasure and enjoyment). Moreover, we have argued that the notion of the symptom is a viable category for understanding how this pleasure/enjoyment is mediated.

Indeed, our case studies allow for more than one reading. For example, transgression does not only appear at Leo Ebing. Indeed, also Google and Sunray (see Fleming and Sturdy, 2007) celebrate the notion or ideal of the radical transgressor. An important difference, however, is that an organization like Google would only allow transgressions which do not fundamentally call the corporate culture into question. In other words, while Google's relation to transgression is closely associated with establishing an illusion of not being at work, Leo Ebing's relation to transgression indicates that it does not attempt to conceal its obscene underside – namely, the brute conditions of capitalist work-relations.

Against these arguments we suggest that Leo Ebing displays an even more sophisticated version of how to conjoin working-self with existential inwardness than does Google, namely by embracing the incommensurability of this key relation and simply sacrificing the latter term in the conjunction – but in so doing yielding a sense of enjoyment. It resonates quite well with Wagner's famous words, from Parsifal: "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you" (Žižek, 1993: 165)*,* or better still, what Žižek says apropos of enjoyment in sacrifice: "'I'm prepared to sacrifice everything *but that'* – but what? The very gesture of self-sacrifice" (Žižek, 1993: 214).

In clear contrast to Google, Leo Ebing's 'reflexive masochistic' cultural model venture to cherish this very act of self-sacrifice. To this ideology it becomes imperative to maintain the mutual disavowal of the other as subject (regarding employer vis-à-vis employee) so that the lived experience is not perceived as a pain deliberately inflicted by the organization. Leo Ebing thus obliterates itself, effectively turning itself transparent, into a mere reflection of the cruelty embedded in the pervasive structures of our time.

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