

Death and the Penguin: Modularity, alienation and organizing

Abstract

The originality of this paper lies in the ways in which it seeks to explore how the depiction of ~~a mafia organization~~ [the Mafiamafia](#) within Andrey Kurkov's novel *Death and the Penguin* might inform our understanding of organizational modularity. ~~We posit that~~ ~~T~~his non-orthodox approach might open up new avenues of thought in the study of organizational modularity while further illustrating how novelistic worlds can inform accounts of organizational realities. Two main research questions underlie the paper. How can Andrey Kurkov's novel *Death and The Penguin* further our understanding of the complexity of organizational worlds and realities by focusing our attention on different landscapes of organizing? How does Kurkov's novel help us grasp the concept of modularity by drawing attention to new forms of modular organization? ~~Through the paper, we illustrate how a novel can expand our knowledge of organizational modularity in the management literature by developing different images of modularity to those commonly encountered in that of more applied and less imaginative literature.~~ Drawing from our reading of Kurkov's novel, we explore organizational modularity as depicted by Kurkov (2003) and then we delve into the themes of alienation and isolation with respect to modular organizing.

Key words:

~~No~~vel, organizational worlds, fiction, Kurkov, organizations, modularity

Introduction

The forces of globalization, the digitalization of society and an ever-greater sense of competitiveness worldwide have increasingly challenged bureaucratic forms of organization (Courpasson and Reed, 2004; Pulignano and Stewart, 2008), with flexibility, adaptability and dynamicity enacted as highly valued competencies at the workplace (Kallinikos, 2003; Marsden, 2004; Pulakos et al., 2006), not just in the private sector but also, it is widely argued, in the public sector (Shearer 2016). The retreat of bureaucratic forms of organizing, occasionally criticized for their lack of responsiveness to complex and ever-changing economic environments (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002), has been paralleled by the advance of ~~modular~~-alternative, so called 'post-bureaucratic', logics of organizing (Heckscher, 1994), along with the blurring of boundaries between private and work-related spheres (Brocklehurst, 2001; Grey and Garsten, 2001). Within the post-bureaucratic rhetoric, various forms or organisation have emerged, such as the networked organisation (Morton, 1991), the virtual corporation (Davidow and Malone, 1992), the project-based organisation (Hodgson, 2004) and the modular organisation. The notion of modularity has been deployed in a variety of academic fields (such as economy, biology or sociology) and is a central

concept in the management literature (D'Adderio and Pollock, 2004). While the ~~notion~~~~concept~~ of modularity (~~especially product design modularity~~) has received a lot of attention in the management literature (~~especially product design modularity~~), research on organizational modularity remains limited (Campagnolo and Camuffo, 2010). We can define a modular system or organization as 'composed of units (or modules) that are designed independently but still function as an integrated whole' (Baldwin and Clark, 1997: 86). As noted by Hirst and Humphreys (2015: 1536), 'modularity is ~~therefore~~ 'deeply embedded in the modern institutional landscape, and underpins the articulation between different domains'.

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The consequences of the introduction of modular logics ~~within an organization~~~~of organizing~~ have seldom been explored with respect to the position of employees in ~~modular~~ ~~such~~ organizations. The ~~adoption of modular logics has tended to place modular~~ emphasis on adaptability, independence and enhanced flexibility; ~~however, it~~ ~~connected to the adoption of modular logics, has~~ ~~these practices have~~ changed the nature of work (Dastmalchian and Blyton, 2001; Kallinikos, 2004) by placing considerable demands on employees to exert greater self-control and self-organization of their work-related activities (Clarke, 2008). In the ~~late~~ ~~sense, of the~~ image of the modular man developed by Gellner (1994), employees increasingly need 'the ability to compartmentalize thought and action into separate modules which can be deployed flexibly' (Hirst and Humphreys, 2015: 1533).

The originality of this paper lies in the ways in which it seeks to explore how the depiction of a ~~mafia~~mafia organization within Andrey Kurkov's novel *Death and the Penguin* might inform our understanding of organizational modularity. We believe that ~~t~~his unorthodox approach opens up new avenues of thought in the study of organizational modularity while further illustrating how novelistic worlds can inform accounts of organizational realities. In this respect we follow in the steps of Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux (2005) in reconciling literary and organizational interpretation. We do so to pose t

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Our paper ~~sets to~~contributes to two distinct bodies of literature: on the one hand to the literature that has sought to investigate the insights novels can bring to the study of organizational worlds (see Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 2005; De Cock, 2000) and on the other hand, to the more specialized and restricted literature that has explored the notion of modularity in organizations (Campagnolo and Camuffo, 2010). Through the paper, we illustrate how a novel can expand our knowledge of organizational modularity in the management literature by developing different images of modularity to those commonly encountered in that of more applied and less imaginative literature. ~~However, our~~Our reading of modularity concurs with Adler's (2012) development focus on the ambivalence of bureaucracy in by highlighting how both the possibilities and shortcomings of modular organisations. Modular organization.

we argue, produces a form of workplace alienation different to that enacted by bureaucratic organizations.

Modularity and the Organization

The concept of modularity has been mobilised in various substantive areas of research in contrasting ways in the management literature. In their review of the concept of modularity in the field of management, Campagnolo and Camuffo (2010) distinguish between three main streams of literature with respect to the concept of modularity: product design modularity (Fixson, 2005; Salvador, 2007; Ulrich, 1995), production system modularity (Sturgeon, 2006; Takeishi, 2002) and organizational design modularity (Camuffo, 2004; Hoetker, 2006; Simon, 2002). Within the third stream, a number of papers have sought to apply the notion of modularity to organizations as a whole (see Djelic and Ainamo, 1999; Galunic and Eisenhardt, 2001; Helfat and Eisenhardt, 2004; Worren et al., 2002).

A variety of reasons have been ~~put forward~~ ~~resented~~ to explain the advantages of being modular for organizations. By adopting a modular logic of organizing, organizations can reconcile flexibility and cost efficiency (Djelic and Ainamo, 1999), while demonstrating greater reactivity to change (Nadler and Tushman, 1999). Furthermore,

modularity allows for the manageability of complexity (Baldwin and Clark, 2000), enabling organizations to maintain a great degree of innovation (Winkel et al., 2008; Simon, 1996), as well as improving product quality (Shamsuzzoha et al., 2010). Finally, it has also been noted that modularity contributes to simplifying processes and practices in organizations (Pandremenos et al., 2009). It is worth noting that, in the field of management, the vast majority of academic research on modularity is industry-based. In that sense, ~~our~~ a study of modularity through novelistic rather than primarily research and consulting encounters can provide different ways of engaging with the concept ~~of~~ modularity. In this other literature, modularity has been viewed in more existentially interesting terms. First, however, we will explain why we turn to literature.

Literary and Organizational worlds

In *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur (1992: 159) notes that literature provides ‘an immense laboratory for thought experiments’. Such a statement highlights the promises of engaging with literary works within the broader context of social sciences (see Praver (1976) on Marx’s literary influences, for instance). In this vein, novels and literary works have come to occupy an ever-greater role in the understanding of the complexity of organizations and organizing (Czarniawska-Joerges and ~~Guillet~~ de Monthoux, 2005; De Cock, 2000; De Cock and Land, 2005; Jermier, 1985; Land and Sliwa, 2009; Phillips, 1995). Insights gleaned from novels’ imaginative capacities

challenge formalist and rational accounts of organizations (see Knights and Wilmott, 1999; Sliwa and Cairns, 2007). Novels can be read as quasi-ethnographies (Czarniawska, 2009)¹, providing rich and detailed empirical accounts relevant to the exploration of fragmented organizational realities (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, Kafka has been a central figure in this attempt to produce ‘an anthropology of organizations that includes literary work’ (Czarniawska, 2009: 366). As noted by Munro and Huber (2012: 24), ‘Kafka is perhaps the 20th Century’s most profound commentator on organizational life’. For Parker (2005: 160) Kafka offers insight through ~~←~~‘darkly fantastic representations of work and organizations’. A plethora of organizational research articles engaging with the dense and polymorphic literary work of Franz Kafka accord with this insight (Clegg et al., 2016; Hodson, et al., 2013; Keenoy and Seijo, 2009; Kornberger et al., 2006; McCabe, 2004; Rhodes and Westwood, 2016; Warner, 2007). While Kafka’s influence on the rethinking of organizational processes and practices is clearly evident, other authors have also been instrumental in the unfolding of organizational intricacies. For instance, Rhodes (2009) draws from Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum* to ~~further~~ explore the theme of resistance within organizations; Beyes (2009) uses Thomas Pynchon’s novel, *Against the day*, to produce a critique of capitalist organizing; Spoelstra (2009) explores Jose Saramago’s

¹ ~~A similar parallel has been by~~ Aroles and McLean (2016) [see a similar parallelism](#) in relation to Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Proust’ work.

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novel *Blindness* to reveal the insight of light metaphors; Sliwa, ~~Speelstra, Sorensen and~~ Haruki's Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* to reflect on leadership; Patient ~~et al.~~, ~~Lawrence and Maitlis~~ (2003) use Richard Russo's novel *Straight Man* to study envy. Sliwa and Cairns (2007) highlight the insights to be found in the literary works of Aldous Huxley and Milan Kundera. As a list, this is by no means exhaustive but it does illustrate the complex and polymorphic connections charted between literary and organizational worlds.

Engagement with literary works takes many different directions. De Cock and Land (2006) identify three different ways in which the domains of literature and organization studies have become intertwined in the study of organizational worlds: first, using the tools of literary inquiry and literary criticism to reform the field of organization studies (O'Connor, 1995; Rhodes, 2000); second, resorting to literary modes of representation in the articulation of organizational knowledge (i.e. exploring the implications of positioning the writing of organizational accounts as a literary genre) (Akin, 2000; Watson, 2000); third, drawing from the so-called 'great tradition' (Leavis, 1948: 17) of literature, even while extending the cannon, interrogating it for its 'vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity' in order to develop organizational theory and morally improve managerial practices (De Cock, 2000; Knights and Wilmott, 1999).

The present paper seeks to explore how Kurkov's novel *Death and The Penguin* may destabilize our understanding of organizing by offering an alternative way of engaging with organizational worlds and realities, more particularly, with the concept of modularity, while also dealing with displacement, emphasizing how novels can open up new spaces of inquiry for management scholars. With respect to the ways in which the reading of the text unfolds, this paper engages with the notion of 'lay reading', as defined by DeVault (1990). Lay reading seeks to break from classical interpretive traditions of novel reading and analysis, thus setting aside the authority of the expert reading in order to open up a range of possibilities ~~for~~ in reading literary works. Importantly, this does not entail a naïve reading of the text (Sliwa and Cairns, 2007), one that is literal; rather, the text opens a plethora of interpretations, connections and relationalities. Reading always has a 'situated character' (DeVault, 1999: 105): any text can be read and interpreted in many different ways, leading to an engagement with completely different sets of ideas and problems. No reading is ever a definitive interpretation; all reading is active, enacting particular sense in particular contexts; this reading of *Death and the Penguin* is no exception.

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Death and the Penguin: Introducing the novel

In *Death and The Penguin*, first published in Russian in 1996, Andrey Kurkov engages in an exploration of post-Soviet reality in the years 1995-1996. Kurkov (2003)

composes a social satire in the wake of the fall of the communist Soviet regime and the uncontrolled flows of capitalistic relations ~~invading that are colonizing~~ the lifeworld of former Soviet Republic of Ukraine. The novel ~~does not revolve~~ is not assembled around descriptions, profound psychological analyses or tormented characters but weaves a sense of unpredictability, irrationality and ultimately fatality. While there is a certain Kafkaesque dimension to *Death and The Penguin*², Kurkov (2003) is not concerned with bureaucratic organizations (in the manner of Kafka) and the complex organizational networks in which the story is embedded do not resemble (or embody the logic of) a bureaucracy.

Kurkov (2003) narrates the story of Viktor Alekseyevich Zolotaryov, an unsuccessful writer based in Kiev. Viktor ~~Alekseyevich Zolotaryov~~, tries, not very successfully, to make a living selling short stories. He shares his life with a penguin, Misha. ‘Misha had appeared chez Viktor a year before, when the zoo was giving hungry animals away to anyone able to feed them. Viktor had gone and returned with a king penguin’ (Kurkov, 2003: 1). Misha, similarly to Viktor, Viktor later learns from a ‘penguinologist’ that, similarly to himself, Misha lives in a constant state of depression and Viktor later learns from a ‘penguinologist’ that Misha is depressive and is in poor health. The world of Viktor abruptly changes when he receives a call for the editor in chief of *Capital News*

² This is particularly noticeable with respect to the growing feeling of paranoia that dictates many of Viktor’s actions and by the strong sense of surrealism and absurdity that underlies the novel.

~~who offers him the opportunity to write obituaries. It is a well-paid job crafting~~

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whose task is –crafting obituaries of people who are not yet dead. Viktor becomes~~

employed as a 'gifted obituarist, master of the succinct' (Kurkov, 2003: 4), writing under the pseudonym 'a group of friends'. The particularity of his job resides in writing creative obituaries (called *obelisks*) of people who are still alive. Viktor is told to choose 'important' people in the news as subjects of his obituaries. While he first interviews people when they are alive to gather information about their personal lives (in order to produce 'lively' and sophisticated obelisks), he rapidly resorts to using stored files, provided by the editor-in-chief, that contain 'those extra-CV details which, like fine Indian spices, transform an *obelisk* of sad, established fact into a gourmet dish' (Kurkov, 2003: 8).

Viktor's life seems to take a positive turn, as his work grants him subsequent monetary allowances (which is crucial in a society that is depicted as being governed by money). Despite this newly-acquired financial security, Viktor remained frustrated by the anonymity of his productions and by the fact that none of these had been published yet; 'out of more than 100 written-up VIPs, not only had none of them died, but not one had

so much as fallen ill. Such reflections, however, did not affect the rhythm of this work' (Kurkov, 2003: 8-9). After some time and much to his satisfaction, his first obelisk finally gets published, even though the circumstances surrounding the death of that man remain particularly obscure. Following the publication of this first obelisk, Viktor receives a call from the editor-in-chief asking him to be on his guard. Despite this warning and many unanswered questions around the implications of his work, Viktor proceeds with his life as if nothing had happened.

In the meantime, Viktor has been contacted privately by 'Misha-non-penguin' who commissions him to write obelisks for him. After a couple of visits, 'Misha-non-penguin' calls on Viktor along with his four-year old daughter Sonya and informs him that he will be leaving her with him for some time. He explains that they are both (Viktor and himself) responsible for some recent deaths: 'What you and I have done is pull out the bottommost card of the card house. Results: total collapse. Now we just wait for the dust to settle' (Kurkov, 2003: 49-50). Once again, Viktor seems to accept this puzzling reality without too much resistance and Sonya ~~naturally~~ becomes [an ordinary](#) part of his daily life. Viktor's terms of employment evolve slightly, as he no longer has to find subjects for his obelisks since the editor-in-chief provides all the information required. Viktor's obelisks always incorporate some 'underlinings' from the editor-in-chief. As he learns, the danger for him is that these indications always point towards whom might benefit from the death linked to the obelisk. As these people

start to die under mysterious conditions. Viktor understands that he has been assembling a list of targets for the ~~mafia~~mafia. Through his obituary-writing activities, he ~~has~~ has become~~s~~ embroiled in a network of mobsters that run most aspects of daily life in Ukraine. The editor-in-chief explains to Viktor that he is part of a group of people seeking to ‘cleanse the country’. Viktor is once again reminded of the need to keep a low profile ~~as because some people are onto him~~his obelisks might be arousing suspiciouss. While worrying evidences ~~of his entanglement~~ and its consequential constant complications pile up, Viktor remains oblivious to ~~all~~the events spiralling around him. In a sense, Viktor is perhaps comforted by the recurrent mention of ‘unseen and unknown’ protection, without which he would probably already be dead.

Viktor learns that his mysterious acquaintance, ‘Misha-non-penguin’, ~~had~~has died, leaving him to take care of Sonya. Feeling guilty about not spending enough time with Sonya, he hires Nina to look after the young girl. As time passes, he gets closer to Nina, perhaps driven by the haunting image of ~~the a~~ happy family (~~that is,~~ a happy couple living with their daughter and their penguin).

A turning point in the novel occurs when the editor-in-chief, concerned for his own security, asks Viktor to go to his office and to bring ~~back~~him a brown briefcase. Once in the office, Viktor takes a look at some other documents in the safe and finds a stack of his obelisks with a note stating ‘approved’, along with a date. The term ‘processed’

appeared on these obelisks that had already been dealt with. ~~It is not until~~ Subsequently, and late in the story, ~~that~~ Viktor asks ‘what is the real point of my work?’ (Kurkov, 2003: 121) to which the chief editor ~~replied~~ replies ‘think what you like. But bear in mind this: the moment you are told what the point of your work is, you’re dead. This isn’t a film, it’s for real (Kurkov, 2003: 121). After an unjustified absence, his chief returns to Kiev and Viktor’s work resumes.

Viktor becomes concerned ~~over~~ about people breaking into his flat to bring letters or presents without leaving any trace. This contributes to a feeling of powerlessness and even fatality. Viktor progressively stops enquiring about his job and its implications; ‘the more he worked, the more his suspicions grew, until they became the absolute certainty that this whole obelisk business was part of a patently criminal operation. The realization of this in no way influenced his daily life and work’ (Kurkov, 2003: 156). In other words, his obvious and very tight associations with mobsters and organized crime do not unsettle him in the least.

New issues arise as Viktor is contacted to attend various glitzy funerals with his penguin. Not in a position to refuse, Viktor ends up attending several funerals for which he had written an obelisk. Despite the consequent financial compensations, Viktor grows increasingly tired of attending funerals and decides to send Misha on his own to further funerals (as after all, it is mainly the presence of Misha that matters). Much to

the annoyance of Viktor, Misha earns more money than Viktor. However, Misha becomes seriously ill, requiring a vet to be consulted. Following the vet's visit, Misha is sent to hospital. After a few days, Viktor learns that Misha's condition is serious: he needs a heart transplant to survive and that the heart of 3-4 year old child would be ideal. Viktor hesitates with respect to what he should do: aside from the expenses associated with the surgery the ethical issues connected with this transplant trouble him. The person who has been inviting Misha to attending funerals (Lyosha) promises to take care of everything and Viktor learns that 'the boys' (whoever they might be) will be taking care of the financial aspect of the surgery and are also looking for a transplant for Misha.

In the meantime, Nina informs Viktor that during her walks with Sonya, a man has repeatedly come and talked to them, asking various questions about Viktor, claiming to be a friend of his. Viktor decides to spy on Sonya and Nina when they go out for a walk to the park to see that man and follows him back to his place where, armed with a gun, he forces him to explain why he has been inquiring about him. There he learns that this man will actually be ~~his actually~~ his successor in writing obelisks and that he is writing Viktor's obituary. In his own obituary, Viktor is described as 'obsessed with a need to cleanse society' (Kurkov, 2003: 218). In that sense, much of the blame relating to the many deaths connected to the obelisks is placed on Viktor. Viktor also learns through his obituary that Misha has been saved with the transplant of a heart from a young boy

who was in a terminal condition. After reading his own obelisk, he recalls what the editor-in-chief had told him when he inquired about the specificities of his work: ‘when you do know what’s what, it will mean there no longer is any real point to your work or to your continuing existence’ (Kurkov, 2003: 220). Faced with the prospect of death, Viktor is left hopeless until he remembers that he had decided to send Misha to Antarctica following his surgery once he left the hospital. Given how things had worked out, he decides to take Misha’s place on the flight to Antarctica (in order to escape the mobsters). ~~The novel concludes thus: “The penguin,” said Viktor bleakly, “is me” (Kurkov, 2003: 228).~~

Modularity, Alienation and the Organization

The Mafiamafia and organizational modularity

~~While there is a certain Kafkaesque dimension to *Death and The Penguin*², Kurkov (2003) is not concerned with bureaucratic organizations (in the manner Kafka was) and in no way does the complex network of mobsters (that Viktor, more or less consciously, has become part of) he describes resembles (or embodies the logic of) a bureaucracy. As mentioned in the introduction, this paper suggests understanding the mafiamafia as an organisational phenomenon. Parallels between criminal organisations and businesses have been drawn since the 1970s (Smith, 1980) and various scholars have demonstrated how similar logics underlie both formal organizations and mafiamafia organizations~~

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(Cederström and Fleming, 2016; Gambetta, 1993; Granter, 2017; Parker, 2012; Saviano, 2008; Stohl and Stohl, 2011), thus highlighting the productive line of inquiry connecting to the study of the mafia as an organisational phenomenon. We embrace this logic by positioning the mafia, as described by Kurkov, as an organisation and more particularly as an instance of a modular organization (see Baldwin and Clark, 1997, 2000).

The organization with which Viktor becomes associated through his obelisk-writing activities for *Capital News* does not revolve around a fixed tangible structure. On many ways levels, and as noted before, the modular organization depicted by Kurkov differs greatly from bureaucratic forms of organization (as typically portrayed by Kafka). One such example is the contrasting ways in which both forms of organization handle-react to internal dysfunctionality and problems. A bureaucratic organization is typically described as very linear in the ways it operates and if an issue occurs at one stage, such as a bottleneck, it can put-jeopardize the whole system in-jeopardy. Linearity with respect to patterns of action is an echo of a wider temporal linearity in bureaucratic organizations premised on Chronos: order, precedence and sequence – all are important. Modular organizations are much more efficient when it comes to handling uncertainties and difficulties (Baldwin and Clark, 2000; Simon, 1996) because linearity is not to be found in modular organizations: the failure of one module does not compromise the others, so that if Viktor fails at his task, another obelisk writer can simply replace him

(or another module may emerge). Furthermore, modularity allows almost full simultaneity between different actions; for instance, Viktor's obelisk-writing activities can be concomitant with the murder of the person related to that obelisk, thus highlighting the ways in which actions can overlap and unsettle sequential and ordered logics in modular organisations. ~~simultaneity of actions within a module (and between modules)~~. Besides, we can note that the linearity of time is also challenged by the fact that one's obituary is written before one's death, at least where one's death is expected to be marked publically: such obituaries are typically ready for publication when the subjects' action ceases to be.⁴

~~While there is a certain Kafkaesque dimension to *Death and The Penguin*⁵, Kurkov (2003) does not present a bureaucratic organization when he describes the 'organization' (presented as a complex network of mobsters) that Viktor, more or less consciously, has become part of. Instead, we should understand the 'mafia type' of organization described by Kurkov (2003) as an instance of a modular organization (see Baldwin and Clark, 1997, 2000). The exploration of mafia forms of organizing has attention to the innumerable inconsistencies and dead-ends underlying such form of organizing (Clegg and Carter, 2006; Parker, 2005). Where Weber raised the rationality~~

⁴ Occasionally the causality is reversed: for instance, in Sept. 6, 1871, *The New York Times* ran Karl Marx's obituary. There was just one problem: The original Marxist was still very much alive and remained so for a further 11 years.

of bureaucracy to an ultimate value, Kafka sought to unveil the irrationality of bureaucratic organizations. Kurkov (2003) inhabits a quite different ideational universe. While Weber and Kafka may have seen things very differently there is little doubt that they were both orienting to similar organizational devices. Despite some fundamental differences underlying the ways in which bureaucratic and modular organizations operate, Kurkov (2003) – just as Kafka on bureaucracy (see Kafka, 2009, 2015) – is keen to put the spotlight on the many inconsistencies, ambiguities and incongruities underlying modular forms of organizing. An assembly of rhetorically ironical images gravitate around Viktor and his world whose echoes are familiar in societies such as we live in and read about in the daily press: hospitals, where elders die unattended; dachas, elite country houses, protected by minefields; young mobsters driving flashy expensive cars in a grim economic environment; amusement and lack of surprise concerning the presence of a penguin (that is depressed and struggles to survive) in central Kiev, etc.⁶

~~Readers of the popular press, such as the *Daily Mail*, might not even find the presence of the penguin surprising (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4042674/The-true-story-eccentric-British-teacher-penguin-best-pals-bird-rescued-oil-slick.html>) — while, even for their anxious readers the idea of a minefield might seem a step too far.~~

~~⁵This is particularly noticeable with respect to the growing feeling of paranoia that dictates many of Viktor's actions.~~

~~⁶ While, even the anxious readers of the popular press, such as the *Daily Mail*, might find the idea of a minefield around a country house unusual they might not find the presence of the penguin surprising (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4042674/The-true-story-eccentric-British-teacher-penguin-best-pals-bird-rescued-oil-slick.html>).~~

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Kafka produced a strong critique of bureaucratic forms of organization by drawing our attention to the innumerable inconsistencies and dead-ends underlying such form of organizing (Clegg and Carter, 2006; Parker, 2005). Where Weber raised the rationality of bureaucracy to an ultimate value, Kafka sought to unveil the irrationality of bureaucratic organizations. Kurkov (2003) inhabits a quite different ideational universe. While Weber and Kafka may have seen things very differently there is little doubt that they were both orienting to similar organizational devices. Despite some fundamental differences underlying the ways in which bureaucratic and modular organizations operate, Kurkov (2003) – just as Kafka on bureaucracy (see Kafka, 2009, 2015) – is keen to put the spotlight on the many inconsistencies, ambiguities and incongruities underlying modular forms of organizing. An assembly of rhetorically ironical images gravitate around Viktor and his world whose echoes are familiar in societies such as we live in and read about in the daily press: hospitals, where elders die unattended; dachas, elite country houses, protected by minefields; young mobsters driving flashy expensive cars in a grim economic environment; amusement and lack of surprise concerning the presence of a penguin (that is depressed and struggles to survive) in central Kiev, etc.⁶

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[story eccentric British teacher penguin best pals bird rescued oil slick.html](#)) — while,

By emphasising the multiplicity of images connected to the activities of the [mafiamafia](#) organization, Kurkov (2003) shows how a modular organization does not necessarily appear in the image of rationality and sense making and opens up a world of uncertainties and possibilities. While this is not explicitly the focus of this research paper, there is a certain interest in looking at the differences between bureaucratic and modular organizations in relation to Kurkov's novel, as former Soviet countries ~~were~~ ~~relied ying~~ ~~extensively on~~ bureaucratic modes of organizing (Clegg and Deroy, 2015; Aslund, 2002; Grabher and Stark, 1997). In that sense, Kurkov's novel ~~sets~~ ~~seeks~~ to capture some of the changes connected ~~to~~ ~~with~~ a transition towards 'post-bureaucratic' and more market-based logics of organizing, a shift that has received much attention in different literatures.

~~While~~ ~~As we have suggested,~~ ~~while~~ Kurkov's writing appears quite Kafkaesque ~~as a~~ ~~writer~~, drawing on a similar gallery of existential angst, anomie and animals, the organizing devices are quite dissimilar. There is an absence of a labyrinthine bureaucracy; instead, there is a strong sense of a personal relation at the core of organizing. The office of the editor-in-chief is active as a fulcrum for this modular organization inasmuch as the editor is seen to coordinate some of the activities of the mobsters. In that sense, the [mafiamafia](#) modular organization depicted by Kurkov

(2003) seems to be primarily a 'space-less' form of organizing or rather a form of organizational design in which spatialities need to be performed and enacted on specific occasions. As such, ~~places do not pre-exist the~~ it is the relationalities enacted through the ways in which different modules become connected in the performance of certain actions that defines them as places. ~~The blurriness of the boundaries of the organization is evident at various different levels.~~ Many different places are associated with the activities of the mobsters (e.g. the house of a corrupted deputy; isolated warehouses where illegal merchandise is stored; government offices; the headquarters of an established newspaper, etc.). While the organization reaches into all these sites there is not a stabilized form of spatiality associated with its modular logic of organizing. ~~The blurriness of the boundaries of the organization is evident at~~ through these various different levels/sites. -In certain ways, the blurredness of the boundaries of modular organizations seems to be compensated by the presence of an established pattern of hierarchy broadly following task allocations: a boss, counsellors, mid-ranking members, soldiers and a group of people more or less closely connected to the mobsters that occasionally get involved in mafia activities. Yet again, this image needs to be nuanced: if modular organizations present flatter hierarchies (Campagnolo and Camuffo, 2010) – this-which can be observed through the casualness of the exchanges between Viktor and his 'boss' – members of a modular organization possess very little

(if any) information relating to other modules constituting the organization. [Managing in the dark is the norm.](#)

Viktor knows that his editor-in-chief occupies a more senior position than he does in the organization but he does not know who is at the head of the organization or what other people occupy a similar position to that of the editor-in-chief (or even to his). Within the context of a modular organization, this greatly simplifies various procedures (e.g. such as replacing members ~~as~~[because](#) relatively little time needs to be dedicated to introducing them to the 'organization' and its culture, norms and practices). Much as Uber drivers, they ~~belong~~[are organizational members](#) primarily through transactional contracts (see Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). As noted by Langlois (2000: 19), through modularity, organizations can 'eliminate what would otherwise be an unmanageable spaghetti tangle of systemic interconnections'. [While there is a broad but non-traditional sense of hierarchy and some places are loosely associated with this form of organizing, there is undeniably a strong sense of performativity connected to this ~~mafiamafia~~ organization. Modularity is achieved and performed through the complex ways in which the organization presented by Kurkov \(2003\) connects to virtually all aspects of modern life in Ukraine. Put differently, the modular organization presented by Kurkov \(2003\) is akin to an octopus \(see Clegg et al., 2005\), having a tentacle ~~re~~\[reaching into\]\(#\) almost all aspects of daily life, ~~yet~~ with the particularity of being hidden in plain sight.](#)

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Kurkov's novel unfolds in the mid-1990s in post-Soviet Ukraine; of its time and modularity is not enabled by information technologies (contrary to common assertions about the role of digital technologies being behind the advent of modularity in organizations). Furthermore, (The elusiveness and lack of materiality of the mafiamafia organization depicted by Kurkov (2003) is reinforced by the emphasis on vocal over written communications. While certain key documents would be produced in a written form (e.g. the stack of obelisks kept in the editor-in-chief's safe), most communications were oral, enhancing the difficulty of tracing events and associations. The different modules appear to be highly fragmented, as the absence of written documents implies that only the people closely connected to a particular case or event will possess the required information (i.e. knowledge is contained within modules).

Kurkov's novel unfolds in the mid-1990s in post-Soviet Ukraine and therefore, developed in different ways in the management literature (see Chia, 1999; Kornberger, et al., 2006; Styhre and Sundgren, 2003; Wood and Ferlie, 2003), can be defined as 'a concept that 'maps' a process of networked, relational and transversal thought, and a way of being without 'tracing' the construction of that map as a fixed entity' (Colman, 2010: 232-233). The organization presented by Kurkov (2003) can be assimilated to the image of the rhizome inasmuch as it does not have specific directions and can grow in virtually any direction (depending on both endogenous and exogenous forces). No fundamental parts (or modules) define such organizing. The strength of a modular

organization rests on the absence of a 'vital organ' without which the organization could not run and would collapse. It has no heart or head to remove so is highly flexible and reactive to change (Nadler and Tushman, 1999; Schilling and Steensma, 2001) as most modules can be replaced without any serious impact. In that sense, a modular organization is more reactive to turbulent business environments and can initiate change more rapidly in such contexts. As noted by Kurkov (2003), [in a modular organization](#) everything can be solved easily ('the boys will handle it', 'don't worry, the guys are on it', etc.) ~~in a modular organization~~. Enhanced flexibility is also reflected in the ways in which employees work in the organization depicted by Kurkov. In a sense, Viktor's work gives him a great deal of flexibility as he can work whenever he feels like doing so and he is described as being in control of his own work routine. Organizational design and governance is transformed due to decentralised and distributed characteristics. Each obelisk is one in a series of distributed ledgers that record and maintain indefinitely an ever-growing list of data records of death, records that cannot be altered or tampered with: they just are ~~— much as is the case with a modern blockchain~~. Through the obelisks the process of developing, executing and evaluating decisions becomes automated and the obelisk makes the record of decision irreversible. The obelisk establishes a form of finitude.

The ~~mafiamafia~~ organization portrayed by Kurkov (2003) highlights both its elusiveness and the strong sense of performativity underlying the ways in which it

operates. Modular organizations perform temporal simultaneity through their rhizome-like rationalities of organizing. While individuals in modular organization are simple cogs in a wider machine, the difference with Weber and Kafka lies in the realization that ‘employees’ do not play a key role in a modular organization (as any module can be removed at any time). Indeed, they are employees only in the sense that an Uber driver may be termed an ‘employee’, albeit one without any of the normal attributes ~~of~~ attendant on being an organizational member. In a modular organization, employees are part of a wider network that keeps being re-shaped and re-performed, in ~~that the~~ same way as a rhizome continuously grows in unpredictable directions.

Alienation and isolation in a modular organization

The following conversation, which occurs midway in the novel between Viktor and the editor-in-chief of *Capital News*, summarises the position of Viktor with respect to his employment:

“Have a holiday,” he said, preparing to leave. “When the dust settles, I’ll return, and we’ll continue the good word.”

“But, Igor, what is the real point of my work?” Viktor asked, stopping him in his tracks.

The Chief considered him through narrowed eyes.

“Your interest lies in not asking questions,” he said quietly. “Think what you like. But bear in mind this: the moment you are told what the point of your work is, you’re dead. This isn’t a film, it’s for real. The full story is what you get told only if and when your work, and with it your existence, are no longer required”.’ (Kurkov, 2003: 121)

Throughout *Death and the Penguin*, Viktor is depicted as a relatively one-dimensional character (similarly to most characters in Kurkov’s novel). His role is as a driver of a narrative in which much of the emphasis revolves around the intricacies connected to his obelisk-writing activities (and therefore the peculiarities of his employment). On the one hand, Viktor can be seen to benefit from a great degree of freedom [with-in](#) regards to time management, [relations](#) with hierarchy (a flatter hierarchy implying easy access to more senior ‘colleagues’) and work patterns, while receiving a comfortable income. The structural flexibility of the modular organization enables these conditions (Baldwin and Clark, 1997, 2000; Campagnolo and Camuffo, 2010). The extreme flexibility of modular organizations is reinforced by the fact that [the](#) employees’ personal expertise is not central to the organization (Hirst and Humphreys, 2015). Viktor did not possess any particular skill related to the job he has been spontaneously offered (writing obituaries) [other than being a not very successful short story writer](#) and yet [he](#) rapidly ~~became~~ very talented at [this-the](#) task. In practical terms, this means that employees, as well as modules, can be replaced rapidly and at a very low cost (echoing what has been said earlier with respect to the limited time spent introducing the organization and its

culture). On the other hand, a feeling of isolation parallels and echoes this enhanced flexibility: Viktor knows that he forms part of a complex network of associations involving a wealth of places, actors and processes but in narrative terms the network remains invisible during most of the novel, leaving Viktor ~~ins an~~ isolated ~~and in an~~ isolating position. The performativity and ever-changing nature of the modular organization with which Viktor becomes associated is demonstrated on various occasions throughout the novel as shaping the ways in which Viktor experiences and engages with his new work. At the beginning of the novel his status changes from being an unemployed and unsuccessful author to ~~that of becoming~~ a skilled and in-demand obelisk writer. Towards the end of the novel, when Viktor discovers the reason why a stranger follows Nina and Sonya and inquires about him, his death has become irremediable, thus fulfilling the prophecy announced by the editor-in-chief: ~~according to~~ which once ~~he~~ Viktor knows about the implications of his work (i.e. once he assembles a more complete picture of the modular organization for which he works), his services will no longer be required. In a sense, the various connections and relations established through Viktor's obelisk-writing activities abruptly come to an end, perhaps just as quickly as they started. ~~This~~ They contributes to producing a constant feeling of stress uncertainty, as any module can be deleted or replaced at any point in time (in case of malfunctioning).

In many different ways, Viktor appears ~~is~~ as an ~~the~~ image of alienation. There is a very academic literature on the concept of alienation spawning across different fields of inquiry (see Yuill (2000) for a review on the evolution of the concept of alienation). Regardless of their intellectual affiliations (Israel, 1971; Maszaros, 1975; Seeman, 1959), these approaches have sought to highlight the pervasiveness and multidimensionality of alienation. What is common to the different treatments, however, is that aAlienation ~~does~~ not only refers to ‘powerlessness and a lack of freedom but also to a characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and world’ (Jaeggi, 2014: 6).

Viktor is not alienated in the sense of being prisoner of his work (though his work is repetitive and not particularly fulfilling, especially as he progressively loses the possibility to choose the subjects of his obituaries) but rather his alienation arises because he does not possess sufficient information to construct a complete image of the organization with which he has become associated, clearly limiting his decision-making possibilities and autonomy (DiPietro and Pizam, 2007). He is a flexible worker but increasingly not autonomous: he can do what he does when he chooses but he cannot choose what he wants to do. In other words, if Viktor’s work is flexible, it cannot be defined as autonomous inasmuch as he is constantly presented as waiting for

information and directions regarding his job. Furthermore, Viktor does not see the 'whole product' (or end product) connected to his own personal activities (that is the death of the subject of his obituary) and does not possess any ownership over his work (as his obituaries are written under the pseudonym 'a group of friends'). The ways in which elements and actions appear to work independently contributes to further detaching employees from their work in a modular organization.

The feeling experience of alienation connected to a modularity of organizing greatly differs greatly from the images of alienation that emerge from accounts on bureaucracies. While Baldry et al. (1998) have commented on how the dark satanic mills, the mills/manufactories of Marx's day, have been replaced by 'bright satanic offices' in light with the turn towards growth of bureaucracy, our paper highlights how modularity allows for the expansion of the entrapment - 'iron cage' to a completely different level from that of being trapped at work in the cogs of the machine inside the 'iron cage'. As the modular organisation becomes embedded within the core of our social, political and economic realities, one cannot simply be an 'instrumental worker' whose 'escape attempts' render the cage bearable.⁷

Conclusion

⁷ The text in inverted commas refers, respectively, to two remarkable examples of industrial sociological analyses of bureaucratic organizations; Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt's (1969) *The affluent worker in the class structure* and Cohen and Taylor's (1992) *Escape attempts: The theory and practice of resistance to everyday life*.

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While centralisation and formalisation (embedded in bureaucratic forms of organizing) have been presented as promoting workplace alienation (see Blauner, 1964; Gaziel and Weiss, 1990; Mottaz, 1981), we can appreciate how a different form of alienation emerges from a modular organization revolving around flexibility and decentralisation. Kurkov (2003) conjures up the image of the alienated worker in a modular organization that enacts a different form of precariousness, one in which the lack of tangibility and enhanced independence between the different modules (Campagnolo and Camuffo, 2010) leads to ~~the~~ flexible ease in removing a module at any time. Compared to a bureaucratic organization, no module is a vital organ and if some modules disappear, new ones will emerge, rhizomatically, along with new forms of connectivity and new relations. Ultimately, continuously new forms of precariousness and dependency align with being fully flexible. The fact that Viktor must depend on the limited amount of information he is given (occasionally learning that he has to hide from hit men who are ~~after seeking to eliminate~~ him) reinforces the feeling of isolation produced by this modular ~~mafiamafia~~ organization. Finally, Viktor seems oblivious to all that is around him; just blindly he follows whatever direction he is given by his direct boss (seduced by the easy money he obtains and reluctant to question the ways in which the system operates for fear of losing ~~his the~~ advantage of being employed in it). Viktor's to a higher status (along with the ~~Mafiamafia~~ interest in his writing competencies) is as as his fall when he learns that an obelisk is being written about him. Viktor experiences

a blurring of the boundary between private life and work commitments, as he needs ~~to~~ ~~to be~~ always to be available (always contactable or contractible) when needed. He ~~let great deal~~ of time expecting to be contacted by his boss, displaying a high level of dependency; ~~being~~ being obliged to accept any work offered. There is a constant tension between flexibility/autonomy, connectivity/isolation and unpredictability/planning with respect to Viktor's obelisk-writing activities. Flexibility and decentralisation are seen to produce isolation (difficulty of knowing the boundaries of the organization as well as other persons involved), high information dependency as well as a false feeling of comfort and security.

In a final coda, we see that Misha is Viktor's alter ego, a creature out of context, in an alienating world that it struggles to understand, surviving, sickly and isolated, void of human form. In that sense, we can, perhaps, appreciate more deeply the wider resonance of ~~that the~~ final sentence in the novel: "The penguin," said Viktor bleakly, "is me" (Kurkov, 2003: 228).

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