

# Cliché and Organization



# Cliché and Organization:

*Thinking with Deleuze and Film*

By

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## ON THE TEXT

This book was originally written in the Dutch language as a PhD thesis. In this thesis various original texts were translated into Dutch. Others, especially all the citations from films, were left in the original language. The book was published in the Netherlands in 2014. During the process of translating my thesis into English I quoted previously existing English translations verbatim as well as using my own English translations of foreign-language texts. The decision of whether or not to use my own translation was always based on the clarity of the previously existing translation and whether it strengthened the text. A complicating factor is that some words which are used in the Dutch language are difficult to translate. An example is the Dutch word: “maakbaarheid,” for which I consider “mouldability” to be the most suitable translation. Mouldability is one of the key words in the text, and it implies that something can be created according to a plan or shaped in accordance with a specific set of criteria, as well as the dominant belief that this is actually possible. Some other words of German origin can be easily translated into Dutch, but are difficult to translate into English. An example is the German “schein,” which is “schijn” in Dutch. In English I have chosen the word “appearance” for this, because I feel that it most accurately conveys the meaning of its German counterpart. It is especially used in the idea of an appearance-reality, i.e. something that is considered real when in fact it is not because it remains an illusion. Another example is the German word “wohnen,” specifically how it is used and explained by Martin Heidegger. I have chosen to translate this with “living.” This is more or less fueled by the idea of “das Wohnzimmer,” “the living-room,” which emphasizes what the concept of living should refer to in this book. In other texts, “wohnen” is translated as “dwelling,” which could be related to another concept I used: “nomadology.” Nevertheless, I consider “living” the preferred translation. Related to this is the Heideggerian concept of “Geviert,” which I have chosen to translate as “fourfold.” Another example is “Wohnenlassen,” which I have translated as “let-live,” i.e. allowing for the possibility to live. In the original PhD version there were also various images of films, like *The Big Lebowski*, *eXistenZ*, and *Clerks*, and various images of architecture from Frank Lloyd Wright and Lebbeus Woods among others. I decided to leave them out because of the

difficulty involved in obtaining the various publishing rights. However, I do believe that the text itself is strong enough and I feel that the absence of these images does not hamper the clarity of the arguments. Furthermore, it is a good reason to watch the various films and to visit the various buildings discussed in this book.

In May 2015, the Dutch version of this book was nominated for the Book of the Year award by OOA, which is the Dutch organization for management consultants. This was surprising to me as the book is not primarily about management or consultancy. Even more interesting is the fact that it does not deliver a method, or a “right” way to do things in organizations, which is, after all, the entire point of consultancy. It is a philosophical book on organization, using film and architecture. Philosophy, as I have been informed, is not meant to solve problems, but to cause trouble, a description that I really like and one that helps me to explain my work and further research. After all, once you start there is no end to it, and it becomes this beautiful obsession.



# INTRODUCTION

In our strange and enchanting world of organizations, we witness an increasing urge for sameness. The ways in which they organize and present themselves are becoming more and more identical. Therefore, the claim can be made that organizations are caught in clichés. This imprisonment and especially the possible alternatives represent the focal point of this investigation.

What is the basis of this statement that organizations are caught in clichés? Besides a certain feeling that has arisen in me through many years of experience of working in organizations, I also started thinking in terms of clichés through my interest in organization studies. The way organizations present themselves, based on certain achievements and future goals, can be researched through annual reports. While studying the annual reports from four different organizations I noticed a uniformity in ideas, statements, and representations, which formed the basis of these four different reports. The suppositions made about the organizations can be considered cliché-like. But what is a cliché?

In the dictionary, the word “cliché” is described as a pressure plate in which a negative is represented. In other words, it is a sort of mould that can be used for the exact copying of an original. This means that a cliché creates the perfect copy. Deviations are seemingly impossible. Creativity is only needed once, namely for the manufacturing of the mould. When that is done, there is only room for reproduction, and changes are considered illicit. Apart from what goes on in its surroundings, or from the specific influence of people—in short, apart from contextual specificities, the cliché remains fully intact. Therefore it is the ultimate condition of stability and maintenance. The art is in the making of the mould. Organizations can copy this mould, into which language is poured as endlessly as pleased. It is like a photographic negative. The quality of the copies is guaranteed. The cliché can be reused continuously.

## Annual Reports

Let us return to the aforementioned four annual reports and find out what they have to tell us. Looking at organization A, we learn that they want to be decisive, evident and friendly. They expect their employees to be

“professional actors.” By means of a call-center they strive for speed, quality, and availability. In order to control this, they monitor, secure, and fix positive results. A wants to be modern, goal-oriented, focused on customers, and a serious partner. For this results have to be accomplished. It is important to keep the organization on track. The route, which has been decided upon in advance, has to be maintained. They strive for some sort of cruise control, whereby the navigation system is to be set only once. Furthermore, they speak of intensity, experiment, and an increasing cooperation in order to achieve the goal—the so-called “eye on the future.” The goal is not open for discussion and all means are justified. The means, in other words, are chosen for their possibility of realizing a contribution to the reaching of the goal. They search for the controlling of costs and an increase in efficiency in order to enlarge the potency for change. Potency for change is understood as sticking to a course that has been outlined in advance. Furthermore, attention is given to quality-management and the employability of staff.

What do we read in the annual report of organization B? They aim their focus on core activities, a strong market position, and they try to strengthen these through alliances. They strive for a positive and structural contribution to a stimulating and dynamic work environment. They want to realize company-goals, and for this they are depending on the cooperation of their environment as it is ruled by the government. They think in terms of cost-measures, improvement of productivity, innovation, efficiency, transparency, flexibility, growth, sustainability, smartness, quality of the network, and advantages through synergy. Organization B wants a larger turnover, a higher output, and access to new markets. They want a cleverer use of production facilities and share all that under the motto “celebrating the spirit.” They mention the value of the network and especially the so-called “hubs.” This should come about in a project-like fashion, where the chain should become more transparent, growth should be selective and the market should be secured and further enlarged. They strive for future certainties through the initiation of projects and pilots. This should include short-term as well as long-term solutions. The customer is offered a bigger influence and the interaction with people is given a central role. From the staff more flexibility is expected. This will also be investigated further through a pilot. Furthermore, they try to increase the public acceptance.

What can we say of the annual report of organization C? Goals take a central position and designate the path that has to be followed. The dominant terminology comprises quality, structure, professionalism, and added value. Everything revolves around the customer, and the

organization wants to meet the justified expectations, wishes, and desires as much as possible. Profits have to increase, the organization should become more professional, routine is important, and goals which have been set in advance must be reached, come hell or high water. What is stipulated in advance should be realized in the end. That the organization cannot do this on its own is shown by its declaration of dependency from the government, which has to arrange various matters for it. These preconditions must be realized, otherwise the feasibility of the goals becomes problematic. Furthermore, they are thinking about the alliances that should take shape in network-like constructions. These should guarantee the long-term strategy. All this is laid down in policy plans. In order to monitor these they use control, audits, and compliance. A lot of importance is given to procedures, directives, and regulations. Furthermore, the image presented to the outside world, or how the outside world could interpret this, is focal. The image is important and influences the reaching of the fixed goal. Also, the image as it takes shape internally, in other words how staff experiences working in the organization, is considered important. This is justified by an annual social report. How the employees experience their work is supposedly considered relevant.

This leaves us with organization D. This organization analyzes the past and uses this to shape a vision. Subsequently, it looks to the future, something that results in a mission statement. In this, strength, innovation, efficiency, excellence, quality, balance, and performance are the central issues. The emphasis is constantly on power. This is apparently the major theme that is expected to increase the potency and protect them or help against tough competition. The surroundings are unpredictable, dangerous, and ruthless. Therefore, next to power, creativity is needed to ensure success. The reason the report is made is that it can be read as a route to success. Continuity plays its part, just like challenge, maintenance, improvement, and liability. The chosen route should lead to top quality, tradition, aspirations, authenticity, and pleasure. This is all compared to a decent balance between price and quality. For this, it is important to measure results and join forces. Organization D also feels the need for the regulating influence of the government, which is seen as a key player in the cultivation of markets in order to adapt them to fair competition.

What all four annual reports show is a univocality in language, goals, and expectations. All four believe in analysis. This is the basis on which they diagnose a prescribed situation in order to set goals and designate the necessary recourses. The surroundings have a dominant influence. The customer on the one hand and the competitors on the other stipulate the strategy. Their own strength is in tradition, which should be maintained in

order to guarantee continuity. The staff should comply with this idea, for which they get special training and are expected to enlarge their flexible attitude. The staff is, above all else, seen as a machine that can be programmed. The competitors are seen as transparent appearances, which can be fathomed and with which a profitable alliance can be formed. Ratio comes first. The truth is discernible and can be understood and shaped in a profitable way. The main dependence is on the government, which should supply regulations in order to increase the conditions on the market. The present situation or how it is analyzed is unacceptable. Danger lurks, consisting in a changing reality that takes place in the organization and its surroundings. As the surroundings designate the route, they should go with the flow, and for this giant steps are needed. This looks like an awkward situation. However, the managers of the organization do not perceive it in this way—it is seen as a challenge, and they are optimistic about the chances of reaching their goals. Above all, there is optimism in the annual reports. The pictures of the managers, who signed these reports, show self-confident, smiling men, who are sharply dressed and do not question the designated route. The atmosphere is optimistic and, according to them, the goal is no illusion but an achievable reality.

They are convinced that the outside world is complex and has to be conquered. This means that the legitimacy of organizations comes from an outside world that was already there, and which brings forth organizations. But this is a situation that has to be controlled, and all four organizations need the help of others, mainly the government, in this. The government should create conditions that make conquering possible. The fact remains that no matter in what way they arrange the internal organization, the outside world or the environment remains an obstacle. A further recurring assumption is that they have to choose allies. Conquering is not done by yourself, but with the help of allies. The struggle is a war and besides the military language needed, they also draw on the history of warcraft.

What else is there to say? What all four assume is a so-called means-ends rationality. There is an end to achieve and for this the right means have to be chosen. The choice of the means and the end is made through a thorough analysis of the previous situation. The teleological thought is leading in an organization and is not to be debated. In other words, the reaching of the end or the achieving of the goal depends on the cooperation of others acting in a capricious environment. In order to be an interesting partner they search for a clear representation of their own organization. They want to be open and transparent. The other should get a clear image in which nothing is hidden. The credo is openness through transparency, but transparency alone is not enough. The image created

through transparency should be an ideal one. The image which is painted in the annual reports is of the clean and efficient machine, in which the employees are happy and well educated, and comply in further strengthening the competitive position. The employees are subordinate to the machine; in other words, they are its servants. Efficiency comes first.

At first glance, the above-mentioned characteristics are not really strange if we assume that they concern four rather similar organizations. This, however, is not the case. Organization A is the UWV, the Dutch governmental organization for the welfare of the unemployed or those otherwise unfit for work. It has been criticized since its beginnings in 2002 and has been trying to transform itself from a traditional governmental organization to a modern service that focuses on customers. Organization B is the KLM, the Dutch airways who merged with Air France a few years ago and which is still an important international player. Organization C is Ajax, the Dutch soccer club, which wants to make its successes from the past the contemporary standard. Finally, organization D is Grolsch, one of the leading Dutch beer breweries which is successfully making its way in the international market, without losing sight of local tradition. These are four totally different organizations that seemingly look to the future in the same way and which describe the same issues in the same language. This suggests that they are all using the same mould. Where UWV has a clear societal task and should not be concerned with making profits, one can doubt if this is the case with Grolsch or KLM. Still, they talk in the same way about organizing. Where Ajax depends on the personal qualities of its players and coaches and especially on their physical fitness, KLM leans on the quality and attractiveness of its flights. With Grolsch it is mainly the customers preference of taste, and with UWV the political climate that directs their strategy. Nevertheless, all four choose the same mould to shape their policies. They are all caught in the same clichés, and in this way they try to direct the world and assume a unique position.

What is furthermore noticeable in these efforts is the high level of abstraction. The impression that arises is that this striving for openness leads to a superficiality that seems necessary to guarantee recognition. In order to maintain themselves, various matters are left unspoken or are denied. The real motivators of the employees are not mentioned, and neither are the place of work or the workspace. It seems as if all feelings in the machine are absent. We can wonder about this certain approach where employees are seen as the rational means of production only. Do people comply with such a role? Or is this image in which people are only the means of production the only image that can be created of an organization? I do not believe that this is the case.

We can assume that there are more images of organization. The question is, why have these images vanished from sight? From this we can conclude that only a limited image of reality is presented. We can even argue that the reality they show is an illusion. Now, there is nothing wrong with an illusion—the problem is that these cases are presented as reality. A too-limited and too-general image is created. My argument is that if we do not recognize any alternatives and learn how to use them, organizations will get caught in their own clichés more and more, and as a result will hollow themselves out or undermine themselves. In other words, they will come into conflict with themselves. It almost seems as if there are no alternatives. They are all caught in the same mould, in the same cliché-like thinking and acting. No one dares to challenge the means-ends rationalism, transparency, efficiency, cooperation, the compulsion for conquest, the faith in the strong leader, a sequential passing of time, a clear beginning and ending, and the happy end. These are the clichés that are relevant in this research.

It is thus necessary that we show alternatives, that we start looking for new ways of organizing. In this, the clichés mentioned are abolished. People are seen as corporeal, ratio is only used when necessary, ends are used in the right context, and it becomes important to value the building in which the organization lives. The question at hand is, how can we imagine this? To make this possible, we have to address disciplines that can offer an alternative, like film and architecture.

## **Textbooks**

We could argue that the world as it is sketched in the annual reports is not a good representation of organizations. In other words, it presents a false image, one that suggests that annual reports are only a means of communication or advertisement—that these are images in which organizations themselves do not believe and which play no relevant part whatsoever. That it is a world in which the creators themselves do not believe. A world which is constructed for other organizational purposes. This should imply that there exists another image of organizations that is more realistic. Before addressing the question of these other images of organizations, I want to address the question of how these images are created. Not the results as they are presented in the annual reports, but the way in which these results are achieved. Which ideas or conceptions are relevant? In what way do we gain information on organizations? Where do all these conceptions come from? A possible answer can be found in the

education and studying of organization. What images are created by textbooks on organization?

Let us have a look at three examples: *Strategic Management, Competitiveness and Globalization* (Volberda, Morgan, Reinmoeller, Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2011), *Marketing Management* (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2009) and *Exploring Corporate Strategy* (Johnson & Scholes, 1999). These three thick books supply us with a cross section of the process of organization. They offer the ingredients of the annual reports. They show that the process of organization has a clear goal—success. The books argue more or less that if we follow their directions, we will earn the success we are entitled to. For a student this is a diploma, as he or she has consumed and digested all this knowledge. For the organizations it is financial gain.

If we open these textbooks we see similar pictures of optimistic faces, as in the annual reports—different faces, but the same image. In the annual report it was at the end that we were surprised with their self-assured optimism. In the textbooks, however, they are there in the beginning. These images are what should give us faith in the quality of the knowledge presented. The legitimacy of knowledge is the starting point of the textbooks. They are like portraits created by the same director—identical facial expressions, identical tailor-made suits, identical smiles. This self-assurance and uniformity should convince us of the fact that we only have to follow their directions. The path is a straight line that goes up.

Herewith we arrive at the essence of the textbooks. We are told what we should and should not do. This is substantiated with the help of models and success stories from business cases. These cases repeatedly show a world that is identical to that of the annual reports. They implicate that we can gain the same level of success, and for this we only have to do the same as in the cases presented. We only have to copy a good example. In this way, annual reports and textbooks become dominant and shape a system that seems impossible to break out of. They become identical copies from which an original vanishes. The image of organizations is stipulated through this interaction.

In the textbooks we see a wide variety of organizations, like Google, Dell, Ikea, Armani, BBC, Al Jazeera, DSM, Ryanair, Ferrari, and many others. Various organizations that all organize in the same way. These are supported by specific leaders that should make the difference, people like Steve Jobs of Apple, Richard Branson of Virgin, or Renzo Rosso of Diesel. We see these organizations being successful all over the world. On the one hand, the uniqueness of these successes is discussed, and on the other we are informed on the analysis of this success. This analysis puts

the student of these books in a position to copy that success. In other words, the textbook offers a mould that can be used for copying. It is comparable to using a success formula. The enigma of success is explained; the mystery is unmasked, and shows us that success is within everyone's reach. It makes it clear that every dream can become a reality, but only if we follow the path described in the textbooks.

In order to make this even clearer, each book starts with a scheme that can be regarded as a route. This is the path to success, which is identical to the route through the book. At the beginning of each chapter we see the various components breaking up the whole into logical parts. This implicates a straight line with clear forks and a logical sequence. From the first chapter until the last, there is a logical path to success. The importance of pre-fixed paths is not doubted. Elements like planning, leadership, and control play a crucial part. It is not a matter of searching or discovering, but of applying.

This, however, does not mean that it is a simple story. On the one hand, the textbooks try to cover the whole world of organization. On the other, they try to lay down a logical and transparent world. This should enable us to understand these organizations and to copy the wise lessons of these shining men in their three-piece suits. Success seems unavoidable. The chance of failure is minimized. Should this, for whatever reason, not be successful in the end, than the blame cannot be laid on the textbook or the shining men. We can only blame ourselves, or the execution and adaptation of the models. Only humans can make the machine of organizations malfunction.

The annual reports and textbooks show the same cliché-like opinions. It is all about models that just have to be copied and used. It is the world of calculative thinking instead of free and open-minded thinking. Free thinking is unwanted here. It is a world obsessed with teleology, mouldability, transparency, and sequentiality. The reason we name it an obsession is based on the blind faith and systematic refusal of alternatives. Textbooks try to figure out the main ingredients of the basic laws of organization. It is like the search for the ultimate truth and certainties that exist beyond time and place. It is about fill-in formats instead of concepts. It is about linear movements that constantly move in the same direction. This linearity makes it possible for us to put these processes in a linear timeframe. We can adapt them to clock time. In other words, we can give them a place in time. Through this, they become programmable and the only thing we need is to find the right means to reach the goal in a fixed time. The organization is rebuilt into a programmable machine, in which all the parts, including humans, are subordinated to it. In order to reach



this goal all parts must be thoroughly adjusted. The machine is created through the pre-fabricated mould. It is clean, transparent, efficient, and promises cruise-control. This is the ideal speed for the machine—the speed that offers the highest output.

We see this presented in the widely shown organizational charts or the models that should give us insight of the market and our competitors. Just like in the annual reports, the outside world is a crucial element. This outside world demands on the one hand allies and on the other hand flexibility or potency for change. The organization needs this potency in order to be a strong player. Herewith, the strong leader is also important. He is the one who is able to adapt to certain situations and is able to steer the organization in a certain direction. Here we see the same military language as we have seen in the annual reports.

The textbooks offer us a world of artificial models, whose language we have to learn first in order to be able to use them. It is a world that should be strange to us. Still the textbooks claim that this is our world of organizations. It gives the impression that a surface is created that implies deep structure, but that doesn't deliver this. Everything remains a strange and artificial world. It puts our world and thus the world of organizations at a distance. It is claimed that solutions are available and that we can find them, but somewhere the feeling creeps up on us that we are stuck in the artificial world of textbooks, without ever reaching the real world of organizations. It is this utopian image that tries to assure us that we know what is going on and what action we have to conduct. It claims that this should always function and be within anyone's reach. This can be doubted. This illusion is presented as reality, and strangely enough it is these presented organizations that are out of this world.

The annual reports and textbooks display a one-dimensional image of organizations. Overall, we see a uniform representation. Success is unavoidable—we only have to copy it. We have seen that annual reports and textbooks are one and cannot be separated. They make use of the same uniformity. Their trust in the mould is identical. In the continuation of this research I will therefore, whenever referring to annual reports, consider this as the image of organizations as presented in textbooks or anywhere else. The cliché has gained a strong position and sees to it that the images become identical. It shows that the cliché is almost inescapable.

## **Isomorphism**

The idea that organizations are caught in clichés is not new. There is a long history in the research of organizations becoming identical. The term

isomorphism, or similarity, is often used to describe this process. The question is, in what way did isomorphism start to play a part in organizations? Obviously, organization studies is a rather new field of research. We can argue that it started in 1911 with the work of Frederic Taylor on Scientific Management. Taylor wanted to make a blueprint for organizations, and this shaped the basis for isomorphism. A blueprint can be considered identical to a cliché. These blueprints make thinking obsolete. This implicates the copying of ways of organizing, which it is assumed will lead to success. But according to Meyer and Rowan (1977) there is more: “The growth of rationalized institutional structures in society makes formal organizations more common and more elaborate. Such institutions are myths which make formal organizations both easier to create and more necessary” (1977, 345). It is thus not only that organizations are becoming more and more identical, but that this is based on myths. Meyer and Rowan therefore question the isomorphism of organizations.

Before we look at their ideas more thoroughly we have to ask ourselves—what is a myth? According to French philosopher Roland Barthes, a myth is a means of communication. It is a means to make something clear. It is all about making up a story that fits. This story should eliminate surprises. According to Barthes, the main goal of the myth is: “to make the world stop” (2002, 253). Myths implicate: “a prohibition for man to invent himself” (Ibid.). Man should not surprise himself or his surroundings. A complicating element is that we do not really know when something is a myth and when it isn’t. Everything can be a myth.

The myth for Barthes consists of not only words, but also of photography, film, reports, theater or advertising. Everything can become a carrier of myths. It concerns material that is already pre-fixed in order to make communication suitable. The myth is based on appearance. It is thus not about reality, but about a certain perception of this reality. It is a, “vague knowledge, which consists of unclear unbounded associations ... it is a formless, unstable, misty condensation of which the unity, the consistency is present mainly in its function” (219). As mentioned, it is not about truth or reality, but about intentions. It is not about how it is, but how we see it.

This immediately explains the seductiveness of the myth. Where the reality is intangible, the myth gives us the illusion of tangibility. It offers the opportunity to give our own interpretation of the real. The myth is able to make the incomprehensible world comprehensible, even if it is only an interpretation based on a fantasy. It looks so real that we are willing to

accept it. An important advantage is that: “the content can almost always be interpreted” (232). The myth needs to be recognized in order to make associations possible. The myth needs to be connected to our own fantasy-world, which we can enlarge with its help. “The reader lives through the myth as a history which is simultaneously true and unreal” (228). The result is that, “the myth is read like a system of facts, while it is only a semiotic system” (231). The myth takes everything and everyone along with it. “In fact nothing is safe from the myth” (Ibid.). It is also tough. The myth is a language which is not willing to die: “it transforms the content into a speaking corpse” (233). It is dead language.

The myth arises out of a historical reality, which we transform into a natural image of that reality. Although we know it is not true, we are still willing to believe it, probably because we do not see an alternative. To put it more strongly, according to Žižek (1989) this means that, no matter how much we try to unmask myths, or in this matter clichés, nothing will make people question them. We know this, but refuse to do something about it. This implies that we not only do not see the difference between myth and non-myth, but that we are not even interested in this. According to Žižek (1989), this is mainly caused by the hope of financial gain. We turn the myth into a reality and blindly believe in it, even if it is an empty vessel. “The function of the myth is to empty the reality: it is literally a constant flowing away, a bleeding or if one wants an evaporation, in short a tangible disappearance” (Barthes 2002, 241). The reality is bleeding to death. Remarkably enough, this makes it usable, something through which we are not willing to give up the myth or change it. This results in the fact that the using of the myth knows no danger or risks. However, for the myth itself there are dangers involved. The first is that we take the myth literally. Its power then disappears. The second is the situation in which the myth is incomprehensible. The literally and the incomprehensible make the myth impotent.

Barthes links the myth to “nornorism”—I want neither this nor that. To put it differently: “we throw the elements between which it is difficult to choose on a pile; we flee the unbearable reality by reducing it to two counterpoints, which are only in balance because of their formalization, stripped of their specific weight” (Ibid., 251). This makes us evade a choice. An important part is played by a vaccine that protects us against unwanted interference or outside ideas. This reduces the complexity of options. The vaccine keeps the myth “healthy.” For instance, the omnipresent idea of reducing quality to numbers. “By reducing every quality to a number the myth saves on intelligence: the understanding of reality becomes cheaper” (2002, 251). Quality is viewed as extra

expenditures. Again, we witness an attempt to bring reality to a standstill in order to create time and space for interpretation.

Let us return to Meyer and Rowan and their opinions on the myth in organizations. Why do organizations use myths? They state the following: "Organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society" (1977, 340). This means that organizations have to choose the stories of how things should be done and these have to be applied. These powerful myths are used by organizations because they conform to their fantasy-world. This makes it an accepted coercion. Meyer and Rowan further claim that these myths try to conform to the surroundings of the organizations instead of what is really needed to do the job. It is all about image and appearance, never about content. It is not important anymore that organizations are doing well, but that they give off the image that they are doing well. It is not about what they do, but about the image of what they do. They are more sensitive about myths than about reality.

The sensitivity for myth leans strongly on the trust in ratio. The more complex and unpredictable the organization and its surrounding become, the more it will strive for formalism and rationalism. The mythical element is emphasized strongly: "When the relational networks involved in economic exchange and political management become extremely complex, bureaucratic structures are thought to be the most effective and rational means to standardize and control sub-units" (1977, 342). They want to reduce complexity to a binary tree structure. Everything is reduced to a choice between good and bad, black and white. In this way, they veil the complexity. Organizations shape themselves according to the myth and not according to their needs. They start to believe that this is the right way. They start doing something without them knowing if it is really good or useful for them. This is something in which they, as mentioned, have no choice. This does not mean however that the organization becomes more coherent, but that it starts to behave more like something with loose parts that answer to an outside world. The organization becomes "loosely coupled." It gives the impression of cutting away the moving parts. It is exactly this movement that Meyer and Rowan try to understand.

How is it possible that we look for more standardization and thus more rules and less freedom of movement in a situation of insecurity? Why do we have more trust in the copy and less in the original? The reliance upon ratio is so deeply rooted in our thinking and acting that we can see no alternative. Our perception is fixed and cannot handle any new perceptions. This is not only the case with organizations, but also with the

way we deal with education. Everything that is institutionalized clings to the formal whenever complexity increases. This is rooted in our society. The less readable the world is, the more we escape into rules and procedures when complexity increases. The construction of these formal organizations thus becomes more and more easy and this is further emphasized by the development of so-called “building-blocks” that should make the construction easier. This is something we have already seen in the work of Mintzberg (1999). The organization-architecture is also developing into a more formalized way.

These building blocks should enable organization. They make the world of organization become understandable and connect it with their own fantasy-world. It is a combination of trust in ratio, pressure from the outside world, and insecurity in the complexity of the world that gives power to the myth. This makes the organization become isomorphic. Other options disappear out of sight. It is a system of copies instead of an authentic system that should be capable of showing and using uniqueness. An increase in complexity strengthens the myth. Complexity is handled with a myth of rationality. This myth becomes more and more dominant whenever the ratio becomes more dominant. A self-enhancing system arises.

This is further enhanced by legislation. The restrictions that are caused by this weaken the freedom of movement of the organizations and strengthen the trust in ratio and thus the dominance of the myth. Obviously, organizations will try to influence the outside world and thus legislation. The positive thing about isomorphism is that it supplies a feeling of stability and viability. Along with this goes the thought that the familiarity with the way of organizing—everyone is doing the same thing, so we know what we are doing—contributes to the legitimacy of organizations. They all start to speak the same language and use the same imagery. We have seen this in the annual reports. It contributes to an easier understanding of these images and words. In this way, goals become clearer and a support can be created. Not everything needs to be explained as it is already familiar.

Isomorphism becomes a necessity that enables the continuity of organizations. It removes the threats and creates rest, because the world is brought to a standstill. Meyer and Rowan claim that isomorphism is needed in order to be successful. This mainly concerns adapting to the environment. Success should be achieved by not trying to be different. This is also dangerous for isomorphism. On the one hand, maintaining the formal structure costs money. On the other, it is possible that various rules that isomorphism inflicts upon us conflict with each other, which makes a

fuzzy situation occur. This all has to do with the fact that myth can come from various parts of the organization. Meyer and Rowan thus conclude that: "These inconsistencies make a concern for efficiency and tight coordination and control problematic" (1977, 355). Isomorphism is thus not an instant formula for success.

Another negative effect is that wanting to adapt to the environment can lead to all kinds of unwanted elements being added to the organization. Through this, financial dangers can occur. Meyer and Rowan see a solution in the case that an organization can partially disconnect itself from its surroundings, in other words it is only influenced partially. This functions as a sort of vaccine. However, the problem is not only its surroundings. Negative effects can also occur in the internal organizations. This coincides with trust. They do not want to question the myth—or the world, which has been brought to standstill. The solid is allergic to friction or movement. They want to trust it come hell or high water. This trust causes the control, through inspection, evaluation, and monitoring, to be minimized. Control more or less assumes that things are not going well. In other words, the world should be set in motion again. This is what the isomorphic organizations cannot handle.

They hope to find the solution in the informal managing of coordination, dependency, and adaptations. Therefore, isomorphism is not always questioned. It is important that they pretend that everything happens to everyone's satisfaction. Isomorphism thus undermines a critical attitude. It is not important that things go well, but that afterwards it can be proved that everyone stuck to the rules. It is trust against better judgement, or even against knowing. This keeps the isomorphic organization viable. Ratio becomes the legitimacy of failure.

Another attempt at trying to explain isomorphism is by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). They started searching for the explanations, classifications, and advantages of myths, witnessing the struggle of organizations that try to be different while at the same time becoming identical. They would have expected organizations that want to be competitive would try to be different, that they would try to make use of their unique differences, and in this way draw the attention of customers to their products and services. The fact that organizations are becoming more and more isomorphic makes them wonder—maybe they do not want to be competitive? Why does this happen? Why is it that organizations that pretend to become more diverse are actually becoming more homogenized? "Once a field becomes well established, however, there is an inexorable push towards homogenization" (Ibid., 148). They also see this happening with textbooks, radio or commercial film. They also see that this is not

something in which organizations really have a freedom of choice. “Once disparate organizations in the same line of business are structured into an actual field ... powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another” (1983, 148). In other words, they get stuck in an environment in which the playing field becomes smaller. They can try to change, but will notice that the power of the ratio and the bureaucracy sees to it that they become more and more homogenized. As already mentioned, this is not based on competition or efficiency.

There are two kinds of isomorphism: competitive and institutional. The competitive is based on a free market without too many restrictions. The institutional is based on a broader view on organization in which political issues also play a part. This implies that it is not only about making profits, but also that non-productive elements are taken into consideration. In institutional isomorphism, according to DiMaggio and Powell, there are three alternatives. The first is forced isomorphism—this means having to adapt to the environment. The second is mimetic isomorphism—the copying of other organizations. The third is normative isomorphism—a process of professionalization. These kinds of isomorphism never appear in their pure forms, but only as a fusion of all three. Processes mingle.

Forced isomorphism shows a formal as well as an informal pressure on the organizations to adapt. This is caused by depending on each other and by societal expectations. This can be related to legislation on the environment, taxes, or politics. “As a result organizations are increasingly homogeneous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions” (1983, 150). Mimetic isomorphism is mainly directed by insecurity. The solution is seen in copying. “Modeling, as we use the term, is a response to uncertainty. The modeled organization may be unaware of the modeling or may have no desire to be copied; it merely serves as a convenient source of practices that the borrowing organization may use” (1983, 151). The modeling or copying can thus be subliminal as well as unwanted. A desire for uniqueness or originality is thus obstructed by mimetic isomorphism. Everything becomes the same, and whether this is a conscious choice or not is of no importance anymore. Enlargement of scale plays an important part, according to DiMaggio and Powell. The larger the organization, and thus its surroundings, the more organizations will become identical. There is no choice, in other words. This isn’t the case with the last type—normative isomorphism, which deals with the further professionalization of the organization.

Regarding all this, we must realize that it is not about the organization as organization, but about the organization as appearance, or our

perception of the organization. This perception is much larger than the organization itself. It can be an appearance in film or as architecture. Organizations start to mirror each other through this. These appearances as a whole play a part in the becoming isomorphic of organizations, and can therefore not be viewed separately. The world of organizations thus becomes bigger, because the various disciplines like architecture and film play their part in organizations. This strengthens the becoming similar of organizations.

“Organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 152). We have seen that this is a situation without a choice. What is peculiar, however, is that it takes place within similar kinds of organization, for instance companies with comparable products or clients. This clearly differs from what we have seen in the annual reports. In these, the kind of industry, product, or client makes no difference anymore. This means that isomorphism has become all-encompassing. What DiMaggio and Powell furthermore emphasize is that not only are organizations subject to isomorphism, but also jobs coinciding with these organizations are becoming isomorphic. Through this, “interchangeable individuals” (1983, 152) appear. These can move from one to the other organization without any trouble. They contribute to the erasure of any possible differences between organizations. For organizations this has the advantage that they know who to hire. Surprises are excluded. This also means that for employees there is only one option—adaptation. This enables the possibility of “career-paths.” DiMaggio and Powell however stress the fact that these ideas are not grounded in any proof whatsoever: “It is important to note that each of the institutional isomorphic processes can be expected to proceed in the absence of evidence that they increase internal organizational efficiency” (1983, 153). Isomorphism doesn’t imply success, in other words, but is nevertheless unavoidable.

Isomorphism is also strongly related to the fear of the unknown or the unreliable outside world. The myth is a reaction born of fear. This is a fear we have also noticed in the annual reports. It is fear that has to be repressed through isomorphism. This fear is coupled with a desire for certainty. They want to know for sure that they will be successful. The problem, however, is that success is unexplainably fickle. This is unacceptable for organizations and this is the reason they start to believe in myths. What arises is a fear of making the wrong decisions. As a remedy they cling to standards. International partnerships strengthen this desire for standards. They keep looking for “best practices.” They look for



comparable examples of success in order to copy them. The fact that these examples are unexplainable does not mean that they are left for what they are. They rather cover up the risks involved. Through the clinging to standards and best practices the world does not become larger, but smaller. Everything becomes identical. Everything becomes a cliché.

Resuming, we can state that isomorphism creates an imprisonment which seems to be all-encompassing, and from which a breakout seems impossible. DiMaggio and Powell therefore argue that we have to look for ways to regain diversity and try to stop the process of isomorphism, in which all organizations are caught. They propose further research: "An understanding of the manner in which fields become more homogeneous would prevent policy makers and analysts from confusing the disappearance of an organizational form with its substantive failure" (1983, 158). As mentioned, they do not disapprove of isomorphism by definition, but believe in a getting together of isomorphism and diversity.

We can wonder about the impact of the work of DiMaggio and Powell. Mizruchi and Fein (1999) conclude that their work has grown to become one of the seminal works of organization studies. The fact that their ideas are so widespread raises the question—how has this impact shown itself? Have the ideas of DiMaggio and Powell been used in the way originally intended? Mizruchi and Fein conclude that it is especially the concept of mimetic isomorphism that has caught a lot of attention. Where does this dominance come from? Is it based on desire? They feel that the reason lies in its adaptability to the dominant discourse in North America. They argue: "Because mimetic isomorphism allows organizational researchers to examine environmental effects without the need to focus on coercion by powerful organizations, it is consistent with the type of theorizing that dominates contemporary organizational discourse in North America" (Ibid., 665). According to them, this is hardly the case in Europe. In North America, there is a strong belief in the hero, or the one that can become a hero through heroic behavior. In Europe, it is more about impotence or not being able to escape a certain situation. Fear cannot be overcome without the help of others. According to the authors, it is seemingly impossible to escape from these thought-patterns. We only see what we want to see.

Mizruchi and Fein claim that copying in North America is more appealing than adaptation or professionalization. This copying results in a slow disappearance of the diversity of the various discourses. What happens is that a dominant discourse arises, which everyone tries to hold on to. Counter movements are only available on a marginal scale. These counter movements slowly lose their subversive potency and become

impotent. It is all about the distrust of the own identity and of not willing to be different. Apparently, organizations cannot handle singularities.

Organizations are followers. They look at others and copy them. They are steered by best practices. On the one hand, this offers security, and on the other it is often a necessity as organizations depend on each other or have to do similar things in the name of legislation. They refer to DiMaggio and Powell's argument that: "similarity has arisen not because of competition or an objective requirement of efficiency but rather as a result of organizations' quest to attain legitimacy within the larger environments" (1999, 656). Nevertheless, it is relevant to point out that Mizruchi and Fein's research is focused on theory. It is not about a research of organizations themselves, but of the ideas of organization scholars.

The reason why organizations consider the image more important than their reality is a question that troubles Atkinson (2008). He specifically researches the way in which isomorphism shows itself inside the United States' universities. He looks at things like the use of mission statements, the way in which architecture is used as an image, and the use of logos. His intention is: "to demonstrate how the perception of higher education institutions has become hyperreal" (2008, 28). He questions whether the creation of those images is what is best for the organization. How does the created reality deviate from the reality in which universities find themselves? In the part on textbooks, the relation is shown between education on the one hand and organization on the other. Now we notice that the cliché is not only limited to the textbook, but that the whole world of education is isomorphic. "Even today, higher education institutions model themselves after the most prestigious, well-established institutions" (2008, 29). It is thus all about prestige and the image of success, but not about success itself.

According to Atkinson, this is mainly caused by fear and insecurity—the fear to be different, but especially to be misunderstood. The fear that the rest of the world does not understand the image you project. They want to persuade the rest of the world. "Image is the face we put on our organizations to convey to others what we look like" (2008, 30). The risk of failure is considered so big that thinking is excluded. The result is that thinking becomes obsolete or maybe even better—thinking is distrusted. The only important thing is to keep on following others. This is the copying of success, even though this success is unexplainable. The fact that this can be harmful for the company's success is neglected. At least they have acted according to the rules. It is like the roundabout in the film *Playtime* (1967) by Jacques Tati, which will be discussed in chapter three.

It is a roundabout that you can get on, but cannot get off. You're caught on the roundabout. The world has come to a standstill.

According to Atkinson, the element of chance is excluded: "there are so few thematic variations among the images that it is difficult to believe that this imagery happened by chance" (2008, 40). There is no such thing as chance in an isomorphic world. We should realize, however, that we are referring to images here. In their own reality, and not in the created reality, differences occur and probably have a unique character. This means that they are not the same, but present themselves in the same way. In their images, they imitate other organizations. This happens under the assumption that they will be successful. What they show in this way is that they can adapt to their surroundings quite easily. The question is if this adaptation is what they should be doing. This last question is not up for discussion anymore, as thinking itself is distrusted.

The university buildings also play an important part. They show themselves as: "particularly old buildings, columns, arched doorways, and entryways, and the tops of old watch towers and bell towers ..." (Atkinson 2008, 34–5). Tradition is important. The old, well-known images are perceived, at least in the eyes of the beholder, as determinative for the quality of the university. They see what they want to see and what they are familiar with. Atkinson claims that: "architecture acts as a shrine for events that impacted the world" (2008, 37). It is used as a container for a relevant and determining history. The image is created that the university was relevant and remains this way through the architecture. This suggests that present, past, and future fuse in this way. What worked in the past will probably work in the future. Besides that, everyone does it, and you can't deviate from this norm. A new reality—Atkinson uses the term "hyperreality"—is constructed. The world that is presented is a beautiful and ideal one. A world in which everybody is happy and success awaits.

This is similar to the ideas of Charles Jencks (2002), who believes that architecture represents a language that can be seen as code. The perception of architecture by the spectator, guest, or user is designated by the identification of the image with a certain code. Through the code, the building receives a meaning. The spectator understands what the building has in store for them. The problem, according to Jencks, is that many buildings, especially contemporary ones, do not possess clear codes. The spectator does not understand the message of the building anymore and thus has to make their own interpretation. The building represents, "a cosmogenesis, a *process* of unfolding and sudden emergence, a surprisingly creative universe" (2002, 1, italics in original). The time of repetitive clichés is gone, according to him. The architecture speaks an

enigmatic language that estranges itself from us. “The new paradigm in architecture develops the notion of heterogeneity in a viscous and layered way” (2002, 6).

According to Jencks, the alienation is caused by the size of the architectural projects. They become too big and therefore too complex. “In short, buildings today are nasty, brutal and too big because they are produced for profit by absentee developers, for absentee landlords, for absent users whose taste is assumed to be clichéd” (2002, 12). This gap between architects, users, and contractors is the reason for the alienation of architecture. This also means that the supposed heterogeneity fuels the cliché. Old clichés are exchanged for new clichés. This results in an uninspiring rational standard. This should lead to an architecture that we can recognize and read more easily. This, however, is not the case, according to Jencks, because relevant differences, like those between offices and houses, disappear. We see the rise of multi-interpretable codes that are only confusing. This is the reason why, according to Atkinson (2008), universities start using traditional buildings again. These at least can be recognized through their codes. The fact that in the end they do not deliver what they offer is of a secondary nature. The user has crossed the threshold and believes they understand what they perceive.

But how do these codes function? “People invariably see one building in terms of another, or in terms of a similar object; in short as a metaphor. The more unfamiliar a modern building is, the more they will compare it metaphorically to what they know” (Jencks 2002, 26). When perceiving a building we thus look for comparisons. We look for the thing we already know, because only that appears to be able to give us information on the code. Jencks sees danger in metaphors. He sees them as clichés that present themselves as knowledge, “the more the metaphors, the greater the drama, and the more they are slightly suggestive, the greater the mystery” (Ibid., 30). They seduce us with the idea that we can retrieve information from them, but in reality they only veil themselves. They veil what is present.

When questioning codes we also have to ask—to what extent are we able to perceive them? New codes are by definition strange and unreadable. We do not feel at ease with the unknown. We do not know how to handle new codes or how to read them. This can be considered the reason why, according to Atkinson (2008), university architecture falls back on tradition. They use the known because they know that they will not be understood otherwise. However (and Jencks misses this), an advantage of these unclear or unrecognizable codes is that they can be interpreted. On the one hand they are the soil for clichés—metaphors are

clichés—but on the other hand they are the soil for new and unknown interpretations or uses. The way to use a building is not designated beforehand, and therefore offers space to the code. It becomes a seductive enigma.

What is also relevant, according to Jencks (2002), is the locality of the code. Depending on its place, the code can have a certain meaning or can change this meaning. Furthermore, codes can have a subliminal influence and become internalized. This is the reason these codes influence the readability of architecture as well as the memories we have or can have of these buildings. This also makes them increasingly unexplainable. Jencks also mentions the difference between the language of architecture and of oral or written language. “Architecture as a language is much more malleable than the spoken language, and subject to transformations of short-lived codes” (2002, 34). This causes the following problem: “If architecture is to communicate as intended, it should avoid signs that have only one meaning and, secondly, it should be over-coded, using a redundancy of popular signs and metaphors to survive the transformation of fast-changing codes, and codes of the locale” (2002, 34). This implies that architecture is more flexible than spoken language and therefore has to be multi-interpretive in order to remain relevant. It is also claimed that architecture should adapt the language of its users. This last argument is comparable to the organization that is led by the outside world with the help of myths. Considering our thinking on clichés, we can question this.

So, we have seen how the becoming identical of organizations knows a long tradition in organization studies. The ideas on isomorphism have shown us that it is mainly based on images. It is thus not that organizations are really the same, but that they present themselves in the same way. The idea of wanting to be identical is mainly fueled by fear and insecurity. This makes thinking obsolete. The chance of success is considered bigger with isomorphism or copying than with thinking itself. An important aspect with this is the use of the myth, which according to Barthes consists of a vague knowledge that brings the world to a standstill. In our thinking on isomorphism we have seen no alternatives. Is there another route we can take? This is a relevant question in this research.

## Cliché

But let us go back to the term “cliché” first. The impression may arise that cliché has only a negative connotation. This is not entirely the case. The position we can assume on the cliché is not a dichotomy. It is not about good or bad, but about the idea that the cliché has good or bad elements.

From a point of feeling a cliché is more negative than positive, but that doesn't mean that clichés should play no part in organizations. As sketched in the annual reports, the problem is that clichés are the protagonists, and in my opinion this hampers the potency or possibilities of organizations. Organizations limit themselves if they only stick to clichés.

The positive thing about clichés is that they supply recognition, offer the possibility of identification, and can be widely distributed (Harney 2003; Moore 2001). This makes influence and attraction possible. This furthermore implies that dominance is waiting. Other opinions or perspectives are suppressed or denied. The question we have to ask here is—what is denied? This also means that one cliché can suppress another. This can be caused by fashion, which can be related to management gurus and their models, methods, and convictions. If it turns out that one guru-remedy doesn't work, this means that it is time for a new one—in other words, a new remedy. What is crucial in this is the possibility of copying in order to achieve the expected results.

This dominance is not without reason. It finds its necessity in the fact that management is dominant in our world (Harney 2003). This is caused by the all-encompassing distribution of management in our work, but also in our daily life. Management has penetrated our work, but also our private life. We are in a continuous world of management. It is everywhere. The moment that management presents itself in organization is already there:

management discovers as it arrives that it was already there, that the socialization of management precedes it, that labor bears already management's knowledge. No wonder when management tries to record this scene it sounds like it is repeating itself, stuck on its own surface, stuck in the circuit of the cliché. (Harney 2003, 589)

Management can only answer to the thing that is already present, and is therefore condemned to repetition, or in other words copying. The cliché is embedded in management. Management cannot escape the cliché. For management there is thus only one solution: "Left to repeat what is already completed, management can only utter the cliché, however, manically" (Ibid., 579). This leaves no time or space to think. We now have to ask ourselves what the impact is and how to handle this. Harney isn't very optimistic: "Anyone who has ever tried to argue over a cliché knows it is impossible. Not reason but power conquers the cliché" (2003, 581). We cannot escape the cliché, in other words. Harney questions if management can ever escape this imprisonment.