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**A Tiger by the Tail:** The Artistry of  
Crisis Management

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the reasons for the failure of local and national leaders to adequately deal with the crisis that resulted from Hurricane Katrina September 2005. It is argued that the failure of instrumentality demonstrates alternative management strategies are required. The aesthetic lens offers options that could have helped avoid many of the disastrous consequences of the flooding.

## **A TIGER BY THE TAIL: THE ARTISTRY OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

In September 2005 when the levies surrounding New Orleans were breaching and the city flooded as a result of Hurricane Katrina, questions were asked about the readiness of local and federal agencies to deal with a crisis of such an enormous scale. And yet it was no surprise that there was the potential for a hurricane to cause such devastation. Residents along the South East coast of the United States of America (USA) and the Caribbean ready themselves year-by-year for what they know as the hurricane season, a long window from around June to November where hurricanes form off-shore and track towards land. Why, then, was there such surprise at the devastation wrecked on New Orleans?

In this paper I propose that an essential element was, and perhaps still is, missing from the resource of disaster management strategies. I argue that the dimension that is absent is the *aesthetic* approach. Absent from organisational studies until the 1990s, aesthetics has primarily been contained almost solely in the arts. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics aids artists and their audiences to make sense of creative works. But what is the place of aesthetics in the world beyond the erudite world of philosophy?

Organisational studies have their origins in the notion that scientific rationality and instrumentality are sufficient in themselves to successfully manage business enterprises. This has been tempered in recent decades with a focus on ethics as a necessary counterpoint to the pure rationality. However, until recently there has been missing the third element of aesthetics (Taylor & Hansen, 2005) in our understanding of organisational life and in advancing the project of revitalisation (Casey, 2002).

Aesthetics as an academic discipline within organisational studies has its origins in disquiet concerning the predominance of the scientific view which leaves unnoticed and therefore unexamined the symbolic. Henry Mintzberg, in his ruminations on organisational strategy follows an art-making route, deploying the craft of pottery (Mintzberg, 1987) as a preferred metaphor. Several years prior, in 1985, Mintzberg and Westley wrote a short but provocative paper entitled 'Spinning on symbolism: Imagining strategy' where they advocate a symbolic approach to a field that has relied on quantifiably hard data. Here they take the notion of strategy beyond its scientific roots and postulate an artistic perspective – strategy as an *experience*. Profundity, they suggest, is not found in the rigorous application of concepts and

principles, but rather through the imagination. In making this claim they ask: 'Can we say that organizations rich in tangible imagery are more inclined to pursue more profound, creative, individualistic strategies, while those poor in such imagery will pursue superficial banal strategies?' (Mintzberg & Westley, 1985, p. 63).

Underpinning Mintzberg's disquiet is that the instrumental focus has its weaknesses and that strategy is as much an art as a science (Mintzberg, 1987). He argues that traditional approaches of producing so-called *hard* data, distorts strategic thinking by removing 'random noise, gossip, inference, impression, and fact' (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 258) from the frame.

Almost two decades after their symbolism article, Mintzberg and Westley produced another piece in like vein that advocates an artistic approach to planning (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). This kind of intuitive approach to organisational leadership is finding an audience in the academy that now values intuition as an important compliment to rationality (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004).

These moves in organisational research which embrace process and symbol are gaining a home in the aesthetic movement. Although aesthetics is a philosophical tradition that reaches back to the Enlightenment, with antecedents in Greek antiquity, its entrance into organisational studies is only recent. Seminal works such as Antonio Strati's 'Aesthetic understanding of organizational life' (Strati, 1992) and Pasquale Gagliardi's 'Exploring the aesthetic side of organizational life' (Gagliardi, 1996) advocate for an approach that adds to existing frameworks. They argue that the ephemeral and ineffable can be known and explored.

Further developments in the field have been strengthened by Pierre Guillet de Monthoux in his aesthetic analysis of arts organisations (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004), and Steve Taylor's use of aesthetics as a research tool (Taylor, 2002). In this paper I seek to contribute to these developments by offering an analysis of the Katrina crisis taking an aesthetic approach.

Aesthetics can be defined as 'sense perception' (Williams, 1983, p. 31) and necessarily relies on an empathy developing between the work of art and the perceiver. Rather than seeing this as fixed and lineal with the perceiver deriving objective data from the subject, an empathic connection is fluid and active.

Within the organisational arena, the aesthetic view allows for imagination and tacitly-held beliefs to be expressed (Adler, 2006, p. 491) thereby complimenting traditional ways of knowing and leading.

Here, then, I adopt the view that instrumentality, ethics and aesthetics are all necessary elements that inform management practice. In his contemplative summary of his academic life, Stewart Clegg poses that intellectually he has been informed by all three (Clegg, 2005). This in itself should not be surprising; but what is of interest is the equal weight of aesthetics with ethics and instrumentality. This rise of aesthetic awareness in organisational studies, then, is rooted in the existential question posed by Michel Foucault, who asked: ‘Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 350, emphasis added). For Foucault it is aesthetics, the desire to live a ‘beautiful life’ (Cummings, 2000, p. 220), that allows us as individuals to shape our identity, as opposed to rule-bound ethical codes. By implication, then, translating this triad of lenses of instrumentality, ethics *and* aesthetics into organisational studies provides a fuller picture of what is happening within enterprises.

In this paper I offer a case study of the devastation that hurricane Katrina wrought on New Orleans in September 2005. Underpinning this study is the notion that Foucault’s beautiful life translates into management practice, to in essence, *manage* beautifully. My claim is that the absence of the aesthetic frame from the responses to Katrina and her aftermath can account for the inability of leaders at federal, state and city level to act in a timely and proactive manner.

In making these claims it should be noted that I am writing as an outsider. I am not a citizen of the United States of America (USA) and I live in a country some 12,000 kilometres from New Orleans. I observed the management of hurricane Katrina from this distance and as a subscriber to *Time* magazine, have developed my insights from responses to articles in this weekly magazine and the daily newspapers in my region. In summary, I am politically and socially non-aligned and my reading of events was based on the question: ‘How would I as an aesthician manage this crisis?’

However, before exploring the management of the Katrina disaster using the aesthetic frame, I will briefly explore the aesthetic concepts that would inform an aesthician-manager. To do so I will look at aesthetics’ origins and scope some of the elements that convert from philosophical concept to practice.

## AESTHETICS: ORIGINS AND CONCEPTS

The contemporary study of aesthetics has its origins in early Enlightenment philosophical developments. Most notably, the work of Giambattista Vico and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten form the basis for aesthetic thinking and these philosophers contested the Enlightenment's privileging of rationality and reason over other forms of knowing.

Rather than eschewing history, Vico considered past ages to be loaded with significance and believed that they could not be discounted simply on the basis of their supposed irrationality. As Hampson summarises, Vico's philology was a quest for 'the story of the past, [that] instead of being an educative manual, in which reason struggled with ignorance and superstition ... was an account whose meaning lay within itself, in which any period was as significant as any other' (Hampson, 1968/1990, p. 236).

For Vico, to reject or even discount the past is to fail to see the wealth of ideas and values that shed light on the human story. Therefore, the age of heroes, symbolic language and myth, represent the ground for aesthetic theory, for it is in these artefacts the essence of human identity is revealed. Hence mythical awareness, as a counterpoint to the Cartesian epistemology of causality, relies on a creative imagination that pauses to tease out meanings inherent within a story.

By rejecting rational exploration that reduces human experience to universal theorems, Vico proffers that theorising on human behaviour can be accomplished with *immaginazione*, an imaginative ability to think backwards 'even across long periods of time' (Janik, 1983, p. 41), in the belief that 'human action belongs to the sphere of the variable, of *becoming* rather than being' (Janik, 1983, p. 42, emphasis added). Therefore, aesthetic inquiry through the exploration of myth, heroic poetry and language offers a process of discovery that sees human existence as fluid and continually unfolding.

Organisational aesthetician Antonio Strati concurs, arguing that a transformation occurs with myth-making in that 'people use myth and mythical thinking to identify themselves with the things that they do, transforming or translating themselves into these things' (Strati, 1998, p. 1389). Myth-making can enable people to deal with contradiction and anxiety within their lives. For, as Strati provocatively maintains:

The mythical thought described by Vico, therefore, is fantasy, metaphor and image. It is a way of seeing and knowing the world that has nothing to do with analysis, explanation or reason. Instead, it involves the construction of civil society through the ‘translation’ of people into it, and through its adequate understanding ‘from within’.

(Strati, 1999, p. 153)

This latter claim provides the key to Vico’s thought, namely, that as we engage with the past by examining myths, fables and symbols, we derive the tools of knowing *and* becoming. Further, the resulting personal and social transformation, achieved through aesthetic perception, is firstly internal, leading to the external and systemic.

In concert with Vico, Baumgarten’s perspective can be summed up in the words:

Aestheticis finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis. [The aim of aesthetics as a discipline is the development and improvement of the sensitive knowledge.]

(Baumgarten, cited in Gross, 2002, p. 410)

The implication here is that knowledge gained through the senses augments ‘cognition meditated by the intellect’ (Osborne, 1970, p. 175). Thus Baumgarten applied the term *gnoseologia inferior* (Cassirer, 1944, p. 137) or ‘inferior cognition’ to this acquisition. ‘Inferior’ here is not to be considered as something lesser; rather it is knowledge that is discovered beneath or below that which is immediately available to the intellect through logical reasoning – *gnoseologia superior*.

Following this line, the challenge is for the perceiver to work with immediate sensation (an *inferior cognition*) and to reflexively connect that with wider human values and behaviour (*superior cognition*). Therefore, to become a sensitive thinker, alert to both the noble and the mundane, Baumgarten claims that a perceiver must become responsive to the object and all its attendant elements and contributing parts. Hence the perceiver is ‘in a continual process of developing all his powers and senses, and exploring them in all possible directions’ (Gross, 2002, p. 412), constantly trying to find new angles from which to view an object. In response, the aesthetician too is in a constant process of development and change in an evolving Self-Other relationship.



Therefore, thinking aesthetically involves becoming sensitive to richness and complexity, with the view to transformation at individual and societal levels. This sensitivity may include putting aside already firmly held beliefs about the way the world operates. The aesthetician's task is to become comfortable with the chaotic and disorderly and not necessarily attempt to resolve these into currently accepted ways of operating. In this way, beauty and order are embraced along with the ugly and confused. In what follows I conceptualise these notions into firstly the relationship between the creative act of *presencing* and the responsive act of *concretisation*. I then distil Vico's and Baumgarten's ideas into an analytical framework.

### CONCEPTUALISING AESTHETICS

The work of the two progenitors, Vico and Baumgarten, focuses on qualities such as the validity of the imagination, sensation as the ground of knowledge, the necessity of an historical view, and the importance of myth. These ideas form the basis for contemporary aesthetics which can be defined as 'sense perception' (Williams, 1983, p. 31). In order to make sense of the ephemeral nature of sense and perception, it is perhaps easier to split them into the creative act which is derived from the senses and responses to that creativity which relies on perception. Aestheticians understand this as a binary relationship between *presencing* and *concretisation*.

*Presencing* focuses on the act of creation and begins in the imagination. For instance, an artist sets out to paint or make music and this act of creation comes from the creator-artist's imagination, resulting in paint marks on a canvas or sound from the instrument. Thus a work is *presenced*.

However, a work of art only comes into existence when its audience interacts with it. Therefore, all creative acts require perceivers who *concretise* the piece by making sense of what they see or hear. *Concretisation* takes place as people actively engage with a work even if that is a mere cursory examination.

Within the organisational context these notions focus on the work of leaders in their decision making. Decisions are *presenced* out of the leader's imagination and are formalised into policies that shape responses. However, the creative act of deciding is not consummated until there are actors who can *concretise* those decisions by enacting them. Hence, I argue that the

way in which leaders present an idea (by deciding on a course of action) will guide how people concretise the decision (by acting on that determination).

The task of perception, though, requires a framework from which presenting and concretisation can occur; a set of concepts that can enable their translation into ways of seeing and acting within the organisational context. The aesthetic view distils the ideas derived from Vico and Baumgarten into three elements of form and content, backward reflexivity and myth making.

The aesthetic notions of **form and content**, that chaotic and disparate elements (form) constellate around a structure (form) has been systematised in Gestalt psychology. By attending to the properties of musical melodies, the founders of Gestalt therapy, Christian von Ehrenfels and Max Wertheimer considered that the parts and the whole interrelate together. For instance a single note within a melody only makes sense within its overall context, and yet paradoxically that note may also suggest the entire melody.

Wertheimer claims that ‘the whole is more than the sum of the parts’ by adding that ‘the properties of any parts are determined by the intrinsic structural laws of the whole’ (Wertheimer, cited in Brosnan, Scott, Fox, & Pye, 2004, p. 460). Therefore, the parts and the whole work together, so that perceptions of form and content interrelate.

Antonio Strati (1999) argues similarly, that all human processes revolve around form. The very acts of problem-framing and problem-solving are formative, in that ideas are represented in an identifiable shape. Hence, it is no surprise that Dean, Ottensmeyer and Ramirez argue that form is a base element of organisational activity.

Indeed, we can not even conceive of organizations without evoking form, because the very language we use to depict organizational phenomena is full of references to form. We *reform* institutions, *transform* work practices, enhance or measure *performance*, *formalize* procedures, analyze *informal* behavior, *formulate* strategies, have personnel wear *uniforms*, fill out *forms* (*formulaires* in French), and *inform* people.

(Dean, Ottensmeyer, & Ramirez, 1997, p. 422)

Therefore, both form and content work in concert together. For, to have form with no content is akin to music without sound, or a beautifully crafted frame without a painting. Similarly,

content without a formal structure is like a jumble of meaningless sounds or random colours splashed on a canvas. Both form and content are necessary for meaning making.

The second notion of **backward reflexivity** also has its origins in musical aesthetics. According to the Polish aesthetician Roman Ingarden, listening skills require a 'backward reflex' (Ingarden, 1986, p. 72) with the perceiver continually referring to the past melodic and harmonic ideas within a piece, as reference points for present sound. To explain this aesthetic, Hepburn uses the phrase 'paradoxical co-presence' (Hepburn, 2002, p. 27) where the present, past, and indeed future, are considered simultaneously.

This ability for backward thinking assumes that time is not just a lineal succession of acts, but that current events have a history. In its wider context then, the notion of temporality holds that there is a difference between 'physical time and social time' (Elias, 1992, p. 44) with social time being heterogeneous. Hence thinking about the 'cyclical and qualitative nature of social time' (Hassard, 1996, p. 586) necessitates not only thinking in anticipation of what is to come, but also by retrospectively allowing the past to inform the present. Hence as time is viewed qualitatively, the aesthetician acknowledges that events are interrelated and occur within a context.

The third aesthetic element that underpins my analysis of the Katrina disaster is the idea of **myth-making**. Here the use of the word *myth* is defined as 'ideology in narrative form' (Lincoln, 2006, p. 242). Myths are therefore part of everyday life and enable us to make sense of complex situations by 'helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 7).

Roland Barthes shows the movement in language analysis from semiotic investigation to myth-making, claiming that myth shifts the focus from the micro-analysis of signs and codes to more macro-interpretation. Myths can take the form of words, a photograph, cartoon, an action or even a work of art, and generate stories at a meta-level which are at once 'anonymous and slippery, fragmented and garrulous' (Barthes, 1977, p. 166). Myths shift and adapt and through the process of myth-creation, symbols adopt a global meaning that suggests meaning beyond the symbol itself.

How do we read myths? Barthes suggests that we need to take them as they present themselves and look for meaning within them, rather than in the historical context that generated the original symbol. Barthes claims that myth *itself* is an 'inextricable whole made

of meaning and form, [and] I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics' (Barthes, 1972, p. 128). Myth naturalises images by *freezing* them to the point where they are 'not read as a motive, but as a *reason*' (Barthes, 1972, p. 129, emphasis added). In this way, myth extends a symbol giving it a life of its own, where the myth itself becomes the tool for making sense of phenomena.

To summarise, the aesthetic view can be conceptualised with the parts and the whole being considered simultaneously as they form into a gestalt; the past and implied future informing the present; and myth-making attending to ideology that underpins these conceptualisations. To achieve this, organisational actors require an alert imagination and the ability to access knowledge at the sensate level, thereby allowing that which is tacitly known to inform rationality. As leaders present their strategic plans, those charged with enacting decisions are able to concretise them with the same degree of imagination. With these notions as a backdrop, I now examine the Katrina disaster.

### **KATRINA: WHAT HAPPENED?**

There had been 6 days to prepare for the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina on 29 August 2005. A tropical cyclone had formed off the African coast on 23 August and had begun to track towards Florida. The ensuing floods in New Orleans of September 2005 brought human devastation unparalleled in the recent history of the USA. Loss of life, the displacement of over 800,000 people, the destruction of property and lost employment, all resulted from the disaster; and much of this suffering can be attributed to the inability of managers at federal, state and city level to act in a timely manner (*White House admits Katrina flaws*, 2006). Could this destruction and displacement have been avoided? My claim is 'yes', that by seeing the crisis through an aesthetic lens, leaders could have acted in such a way as to minimise the effects of the disaster.

In the face of insurmountable problems resulting from the loss of personal resources, the people of New Orleans turned to their federal, state and city level leaders to act on their behalf. The floods left multitudes of people homeless and because much of the infrastructure had been destroyed, hundreds of thousands were left stranded without the basic necessities of water and food. Financially, the disaster is estimated to have cost in excess of US\$100 billion, including the destruction of infrastructure and disruption to oil production

(Lawrimore, 2005). This desperate situation required leaders who could lobby for immediate resources and build morale.

In this early stage of the crisis, it was the perceptions of these leaders, how they *presented* the crisis, that determined how the disaster relief operation would unfold, especially in the allocation of resources. These initial reactions were focused on solving the problem of property destruction. Instead of focusing on saving life and rescuing the stranded, state and federal leaders perceived property to be of greater value and sought for ways of protecting individuals against theft and looting. In response to this perception, armed soldiers were immediately dispatched to the area to guard against the citizenry appropriating goods by force.

This immediate concentration on property resulted in inaction in rescuing and supporting stranded people. *Time* reporter Amanda Ripley notes that leaders appeared either unwilling or unable to act, and ‘the hesitation seemed to start locally and then infect the chain of command all the way to Washington’ (Ripley, 2005b, p. 33). Instead of focusing on the immediate needs of victims and seeking ways of alleviating their suffering, the protection of the property rights of individuals became a higher priority. In spite of the thousands sheltered in the New Orleans Superdome pleading for relief, ‘looting was seen as a greater risk than rising waters, incipient disease, and hunger in the refugee Superdome’ (Hari, 2005, p. A19). And yet a month after the disaster struck, fears of widespread anarchy proved to be unfounded and no life was lost as a result of the predicted vigilante action (Gumbel, 2005).

First responses from President George W. Bush also confirmed the view that property destruction was a greater danger than the life-threatening situation that was developing. In his comments in the early days of the disaster, he proclaimed that Mississippi’s Republican senator Trent Lott’s home would be rebuilt into ‘a fantastic house’ (Cooper, 2005, p. 43) but omitted any statement on the re-housing of the many hundreds of thousands of New Orleans’s poor displaced by the floods. Rather than focusing on the needs of the general populace, it seemed that national leaders were distracted by their own misfortunes.

This was confirmed 7 months later in March 2006 with the disclosure of video footage of a White House conversation between President Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff being briefed on 28 August, one day prior to the hurricane’s arrival. From

the conversation it appears that Bush had already decided that property was to take higher priority than potential loss of life.

‘I want to assure the folks at the state level that we are fully prepared to not only help you during the storm, but we will move in whatever resources and assets we have at our disposal after the storm to help you deal with the loss of property,’ Bush says in one part of the video. ‘We pray there’s no loss of life, of course.’

(Jones, 2006, n.p.)

By presenting the crisis as a property issue the concretisation that ensued saw leaders enact decisions to protect their power base, but with little reference to those bearing the brunt of the disaster. The three aesthetic elements of *form and content*, *backward reflexivity*, and *myth making* provide a frame for an investigation on how the disaster was managed.

The continual interaction of **form and content** allows for creative and innovative solutions to be applied to problem situations. However, where either form or content dominate, a nihilistic tendency towards closure and finality occurs, thereby stymieing creativity. The dominance of form sees macro structures taking priority over micro needs; whereas when content is more evident, rigorous application of idiosyncratic ideology overrides the need to see the wider implications of that belief.

In New Orleans rescue efforts became hamstrung because of an inability of various agencies to decide which one bore responsibility for managing the crisis. Was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to take charge, or would responsibility lie with Florida State authorities? Unwilling to cede power, neither federal nor local bodies were able to coordinate their efforts. This led to ‘uncertainty about who was in charge at crucial moments’ (“4 places where the system broke down,” 2005, p. 48). The inability of agencies to look beyond their *patch* to solve a greater need saw the triumph of form over content. Hence, the tendency to protect existing structures and lines of control which were useful under normal conditions now became dysfunctional; and the urgent requirement to respond to the immediate needs of the homeless and destitute (content) became subsumed under the desire to keep existing management structures in place (form).

This was also seen in a federal administration wedded to fixed leadership arrangements. Reporter Mike Allen quoting a White House Adviser writes: ‘The extremely highly

centralized control of the government — the engine of Bush’s success — failed him this time’ (Allen, 2005, p. 34). Being unable to respond to the crisis of the moment by remaining fixed to a given process is further reflected in a comment by Republican Congressman for New Orleans, Bobby Jindal: ‘The bureaucracy needs to do more than one thing at a time’ (Cooper, 2005, p. 43). Jindal’s critique advocated that managing this crisis necessitated leaders to think polyphonically and to possess the persuasive ability to bring bureaucratic functions in line with the immediate requirements that the chaotic environment presented. By being captured by form over content, the Federal Government was unable to respond quickly to new situations.

Not only did form triumph over content at national level, leaders were also emasculated at local level, unable to release much needed funds for fear of the consequences. A *Time* account claims: ‘Leaders were afraid to actually lead, reluctant to cost businesses money, break jurisdictional rules or spawn lawsuits’ (“4 places where the system broke down,” 2005, p. 48). Ironically, by leaders protecting existing positions and roles, a collapse of appropriate leadership ensued.

And yet the general populace showed a willingness to innovate in the face of the crisis by being able to look beyond their long-held ideologies, and offer succor to individuals and families with contrary belief systems and lifestyles. In Arkansas a website, [openyourhome.com](http://openyourhome.com), was created by a private citizen to match the homeless with host families. Through this private initiative, Amanda Ripley reports of a ‘conservative retiree’ hosting a ‘lesbian couple and their family’ (Ripley, 2005a, p. 23), an arrangement, that under normal conditions would have violated the values of both families, and yet was set to continue until the displaced couple found work and were able to resettle. Here at this micro level, people were able to allow the needs of the moment to inform their behaviour, thus allowing the *form* of long-held belief systems to be reshaped by the *content* embodied in the needs of the moment.

In addition, one of the questions commentators keep returning to is why authorities were so unprepared to deal with the crisis in spite of knowing well in advance the probable extent of the devastation. The skill of **backward reflexivity** responds to this question. Backward reflexivity offers leaders the ability to see the present in terms of the past and to anticipate future directions; a skill that could have enabled leaders to be better prepared for the inevitability of the disaster and to respond more appropriately when it occurred.

Over a year before the disaster in July 2004, City officials had participated in a computer simulated hurricane code-named *Hurricane Pam*. This virtual recreation based on accumulated past experience going back as far as the devastating floods of 1927, accurately predicted the outcomes played out in real time 13 months later (NOVA, 2005). Similarly, in her first account from New Orleans, Amanda Ripley also claims that computer modeling had predicted the kind of devastation that would most likely result from flooding. All the studies agreed, the levees that kept water away from a city built below sea level would not hold.

Their elaborate computer models showed that tens of thousands would be left behind. They described rooftop rescues, 80% of New Orleans underwater and ‘toxic gumbo’ purling through the streets. If experts had prophesied a terrorist attack with that kind of accuracy, they would be under suspicion for treason.  
(Ripley, 2005b, p. 28)

Previous experiences of disasters in the Florida region had taught emergency administrators that immediate response is crucial, which is why Ripley reports that disaster coordinators needed to be immediately present and visible. She quotes a former director of disaster relief saying, ‘If you are not visible within 72 hours, you will have chaos’ (Ripley, 2005b, p. 33). Visibility reassures victims that agencies are being active and responsive thereby protecting them against the possible spread of anarchy.

With the benefits of computer modeling and past experience, what could account for the inability of the disaster relief agencies swinging into immediate action? I argue that key decision makers lacked the skill of backward reflexivity. As the term *reflexive* implies, this is a spontaneous act that seeks to make sense of the present in the light of the past, and then intuitively anticipate the future based on these evaluations. In this way *gut feel* works closely alongside the rational view championed by the scientific approach.

My analysis is made with the benefit of hindsight. What, though, would an aesthetician do in immediate response to the crisis? An aesthetically alert leader is conscious of the shift from how an issue is presented, its intentional construction; and the way it is concretised, or read, by those observing the action. Pleas for help by people housed in the New Orleans Superdome and trapped on the freeway above the high water line, offered a cue to those managing the crisis of the need to change focus from protecting property to saving lives.



Such a shift required attention to both the macro and micro levels of disaster management. Therefore coordinating the agencies *and* finding means of immediately attending to the suffering of those left un-housed on the freeway necessitated an ability to improvise and make decisions based on solving immediate problems. In all the efforts of agencies to act proactively, it seems that rescue efforts lacked an attending **mythology** to galvanise public opinion and garner support from the rest of the nation.

By comparison, in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001, now euphemistically termed ‘9/11’, leaders quickly created a mythology as a political tool. The spuriously named ‘War on Terror’ has since become the rallying cry to animate the public and politicians alike in the call for greater security and vigilance. And yet sophisticated technologies that can predict and determine the effects of hurricanes did not awaken the imagination of leaders sufficient to overcome their fear of acting outside the *script*. The problem is that the Florida public did not *believe* they were at risk from the approaching hurricane in the same way the general populace feel vulnerable to terrorism. Ironically, where the adversary is invisible, leaders are able to create a mythology to manipulate public opinion, but when the threat is known and understood, it is much harder to exert control. For:

In times of war or crisis, power is easily stolen from the many by the few on a promise of security. The more elusive or imaginary the foe, the better for manufacturing consent.

(Wright, 2005, p. 49)

Within the frame of the three aesthetic elements of form and content, backward reflexivity and myth making, I have examined the flawed management of the Katrina crisis. As noted, this analysis has been with the benefit of hindsight. How, though, could the aesthetic lens help leaders secure the future of New Orleans and avoid future devastations?

### **KATRINA: MANAGING AESTHETICALLY**

As argued in the introduction, aesthetics complements instrumentality and ethics. Hence acting efficiently and doing justly are added to by acting beautifully. Rather than being confined to works of art hung in a gallery or performed in a concert hall, aesthetics impacts elements of everyday life. How, then, do leaders behave aesthetically?

I have argued that the ways in which organisations behave is in many ways determined by the ways in which leaders intentionally present their ideas. Intentionality, which in this study is synonymous with presenting, guides the ways in which leaders communicate with others. Taking this line, a leader's rhetoric is derived from the ways in which they conceive of a problem in their imagination. This intentionality determines the ways in which subordinates will concretise and enact a leader's rhetoric.

By intentionally reframing the New Orleans disaster as one of saving life rather than property, a new set of problems become the focus. Taking this line, leaders would acknowledge that property can be restored and infrastructure repaired, but human lives are irreplaceable. By shifting the spotlight off property and on to people the aesthetician-leader is then able to actively work towards supporting the populace through the disaster.

With people as the primary focus, resources could be quickly applied to evacuation, rescue and resettlement. This, then, sees form – leadership structures – take shape around content – the need to save lives. Hence the tendency for agencies and individuals to vie for dominance and control is mitigated by the pre-eminent need to offer people security and safety.

Beyond the issue of who has ultimate responsibility are the complexities of the legal structures within which agencies operate in the USA. In 2005, fear of litigation became an obstacle to taking urgent and immediate action. When the legal system ceases to serve the needs of the citizens it is trying to protect, then the form within which the system operates needs to be changed. But to make such dramatic changes requires leaders with the political will and creativity to advocate for those who suffer the most from the consequences of such disasters.

The notion of backward reflexivity allows for leaders to not only see events within their context, but also to anticipate future possibilities. For about the past 100 years the Florida marsh lands have gradually been drained in order to provide for an insatiable hunger for land in the region. This has robbed the area of its natural defences against tidal fluctuations. In the past the marshes have acted like a large soak holes defending the coast line against the tidal surges that hurricanes bring. It seems that reclamation process should immediately be reversed and the area returned to its natural state, if further flooding of New Orleans is to be avoided. This will, of course, outrage those who have vested interests in continuing to drain the swamps. However, to consider needs of a few over the greater good is a flawed approach.

To treat the reclamations as a commodity for agriculture or domestic settlement ignores both the immediate needs of the inhabitants of New Orleans and the long term costs that are likely to be incurred by future potential disasters that occur during the annual hurricane season.

Finally, how might mythology help leaders garner support for rebuilding the destroyed suburbs? As I have noted above, a myth is ideology couched as a story. Bruce Lincoln argues that myth is used by leaders in order to cement their ideologies in the peoples' hearts and minds. Hence he argues that myth is 'speech of power, performed at length, in public, by one in a position of authority' (Lincoln, 1999, p. 17).

The failure of leaders to act promptly and appropriately belied the mythology surrounding New Orleans, the home of jazz. From an aesthetic point of view, the tragedy of the disaster was that leaders could not translate the fundamentals of this artistic form and deploy the essence of jazz to help them solve their dilemmas. Improvisation, attention to the *sound* (pleas for help) of others in the New Orleans ensemble, and allowing the established form to evolve around new ideas, could have provided a symbolic frame from which to make sense of the chaotic environment. Furthermore New Orleans as the cradle of the USA's effervescence could be the narrative that galvanises the whole nation to rebuild the city to its former glory.

## CONCLUSION

New Orleans — the Big Easy, 'America's Soul Kitchen' (Marsalis, 2005) — experienced devastation because of a natural disaster made worse by leaders unable to activate their aesthetic sensibilities. By presencing the disaster as the protection of property over saving life, the disaster became concretised as a struggle between agencies. The *form* of leadership took preeminence over the need to improvise and to make decisions on the fly. Where deploying the spontaneous skill of backward reflexivity, and developing a mythology to captivate the popular imagination could have helped save the city from experiencing the extremities of the disaster that overtook it, instead leadership inaction set the scene for the disaster to escalate.

Whether the organisation has a governmental, business, or social function, aesthetic considerations will enable leaders to improve decision making. Not only are efficiency and moral values important guides to making enterprises successful, so too are issues derived from artistic practice. Following Foucault's determination that our individual lives could be

works of art, so to our organisations. This requires organisational actors who are able to act creatively, responding to the needs of the moment and behaving in ways that enhance the beauty of our communities.

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