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# Meeting and Resisting the Corporate Body Snatchers: The US Piloting Profession in Times of Downsizing and Restructuring

## Abstract

This article is based on an empirical study of employees' experience of downsizing at a US air carrier called Vimanas Airline (a pseudonym) and includes forty two semi-structured interviews with captains and co-pilots who worked at that airline. The product of a fruitful collaboration between an experienced researcher and former Vimanas co-pilot, the paper explores how a new regime of corporeal power and panoptic organizational discourses produced commercial pilots' subjectivity by first creating loyal company employees who actively participated in their own acculturation. Later, after airline restructuring, pilots modified their thinking and behaviour in an effort to maintain some sense of power, dignity, agency, and identity, resisting managerial efforts at further colonization. It became clear that complex and partly competing reality construction processes were at play. Contrary to previous research finding employees to often be complicit rather than resistant to managerial control efforts, particularly during times of corporate crisis, this study reports airline employees both participated in, yet later resisted managerial control efforts. Prompted by one of our respondents we refer to this colonization process as 'bodysnatching' with reference to the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

**Keywords:** Employee resistance, elite professionals, downsizing, merger, airlines

*Less than a month ago, Santa Mira was like any other town. People with nothing but problems. Then, out of the sky came a solution. Seeds drifting through space...From the seeds came pods...Your new bodies are growing in there. They're taking you over cell for cell... Suddenly, while you're asleep, they'll absorb your minds, your memories and you're reborn into an untroubled world...Tomorrow you'll be one of us.*

(Psychiatrist Dan Kaufman advising Santa Mira physician Miles Bennell to stop resisting change in the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.)

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a 1956 science fiction film about a small California town invaded by seed pods that reproduce themselves by cloning people's bodies, wiping out indigenous groups and destroying ecosystems before moving on to new environments. When duplication is complete, each person's body is replaced by an emotionless conformist whose purpose is to spread the cloning process. The idea of body snatching and its power to create self-reproducing conformists was suggested to us by a laid-off airline pilot in this empirical study of the changing character of the piloting profession in the US. This paper is the result of a fruitful collaboration between the first author, a former Vimanas co-pilot now turned academic, and the second author, an experienced researcher and scholar.

Commenting on the effects of downsizing, mergers and outsourcing that have gripped the American aviation industry our pilot informant said:

Well, I'm not happy about [any of] it. In my opinion, that's what pure capitalism is, pure capitalism doesn't care about anything but the dollar. It doesn't care who it fires or it doesn't – pure capitalism will outsource all of its work to other countries as long as it makes a buck. [It is] like selling your body off for money, 'Here take a chunk of my body- I don't need this finger right now, I'd rather have \$10', you know, 'I don't need that little pinkie toe, I'd rather have the thousand dollars' – 'Hey Board of Directors, look how great I am! [says the CEO]. I just made us a thousand dollars' – till there's no body parts left- 'oops that wasn't such a great idea but, oh well, I got my golden parachute, see you later! I'm moving onto the next victim.' *The next body snatcher, they're like body snatchers.*

Inspired by this imagery, this paper probes the experiences of pilots who worked for Vimanas Airlines [a pseudonym] in the tumultuous decade following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (9/11) when downsizing, restructuring and merging became a managerial obsession in the US aviation industry. The paper examines how members of an elite profession who had previously been seduced by corporate promises of high material and symbolic rewards became increasingly disenchanted and angry as they found themselves demoted, and for some junior pilots 'on the street' out of work, and facing a bleak future. The paper analyses their belated attempts to resist the waves of restructuring that swept American air carriers since 2001. In brief, the question we seek to answer is "What is the scope for resistance among a group of elite professionals,

previously seduced by promises of guaranteed material and symbolic success, when they confront harsher disciplinary regimes of cost-cutting, outsourcing and downsizing?"

In this regard, the paper adopts what Jaros (2012: 49) called a “discursive approach to the critical study of workplace identity”, offering evidence that a previously pliable and conformist elite profession underwent at least a *partial radicalisation* as a result of industry restructuring. In addition, the paper advances the theory that power regimes in late capitalism dilute the conventional dualism of body and mind, by becoming inscribed in subjects whose minds *and* bodies become colonized by these regimes to create conformity. As Bean and Durant (2005: 203) noted “While organizational studies address a plethora of individual constructs (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, personality) the embodied identity of workers is a topic largely absent from the field”. Although this paper does not aim to make a direct contribution to the emerging field of the sociology of the body (see, e.g. Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000; Michel, 2012; Shilling, 1993), it offers some evidence that compliance with, as well as a resistance to, an organization's discursive and other controls are often experienced by employees in bodily terms.

The image of seed-pods descending from the sky to take over the bodies of humans, stupefy their minds and eviscerate their emotions, apart from being inspired by the same celestial domain which constitutes the workplace of pilots, captures the sheer physicality of pilots’ jobs and employment experiences (Beaty, 1995; Krause, 2003; Orlady and Orlady, 1999). Piloting is one of those professions defined not merely by an expertise (the ability to fly planes) and command of a 'body of knowledge' but also by its ability to construct the body of its practitioners as a gendered, disciplined, normalized, fit for purpose and even aestheticized entity. At the risk of losing their license and therefore their livelihood, pilots must submit to annual medical and flight checks, must regiment their lifestyle to stay fit, and endure long periods away from home trapped in the confines of a tiny cockpit. In addition, they must 'look right' in their uniform, projecting an air of calm focused confidence. The very authority of a pilot is directly linked to the way he (or more rarely she) embodies a physical ideal. Furthermore, the attacks of 9/11 highlighted the pilots' physical vulnerability and the very tenuous base of this authority when confronted by physical force, something that struck a traumatic chord with the American public. For all these reasons, it seemed natural that in discussing their experiences, the pilots in our study frequently resorted to bodily metaphors or 'somatized' their experiences (Waitzkin & Magana, 1997) – expressing them by evoking bodily experiences, as is clear from the above quote.

The metaphor of body snatching will be shown to offer vital insights into three different phases of the pilots' experiences – their initial seduction by the corporate promises, their subsequent disenchantment and their eventual, if limited, attempts at resistance. The corporate body snatchers, as indicated in the quote above, stand for what is widely seen as a new breed of managers fixated on short-term profits and prepared to sacrifice the long-term health of the air carrier and its employees.<sup>1</sup>

### **The US aviation industry 2000 to 2010 – A brief survey**

Over the past decade, every major US air carrier declared bankruptcy and restructured, adopting what the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA, 2009), the world's largest pilots' union, called a new business model. This model encouraged major airlines to cut costs by parking larger airplanes and laying off experienced pilots, outsourcing their flying to regional affiliates and their smaller aircraft and younger, cheaper pilots. For years strong unions like ALPA controlled this outsourcing, but after 9/11 labour contracts were voided by bankruptcy judges allowing airline management to negotiate freely, and regional airlines jumped at the chance to expand their low-cost, low-salaried service (Author, 2014).

This new business model and its associated outsourcing strategies proved extremely profitable for airlines. Yet, it was devastating for employees. In the decade after 9/11 over 200,000 major airline employees lost their jobs, including over 14,000 pilots at the seven major carriers, a 29% reduction in force (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2010). Although some employees took early retirement or left of their own accord, most of these workers were *furloughed*, aviation parlance for being laid-off, with the right to return to work when, and if, their airline decided to recall them. Vimanas Airlines, studied here, was one of the most extreme examples, operating under bankruptcy protection for three years while it restructured, parked hundreds of planes and laid off tens of thousands of employees. The corporate size of the pilot workgroup alone was reduced by half at Vimanas when over 5,000 aviators lost their livelihood

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<sup>1</sup> In the argument that follows, we frequently make use of the metaphor of body-snatching. In response to a point made by one of this article's reviewers, we should point out that our use of the metaphor of body-snatching is emic rather than etic. In short, we seek to understand why and how this metaphor enters the thinking of our subjects and how it supports their sensemaking processes. Of course, in the interest of a lively and engaging text, we embrace the metaphor ourselves in many instances but it is not our intention either to use the metaphor as an explanation of the predicament in which the pilots in this study found themselves, but rather as a source imagery that accounts for their experiences.

(Author, 2014). Almost 1,500 pilots were furloughed *twice* – having waited years to be recalled after 9/11, they were furloughed for a second time with the onset of the 2008 economic crisis.

In 2010, Vimanas merged with another US air carrier, creating the world's largest airline at the time and attempting to re-establish itself as a major international airline. With almost 90,000 employees, 700 aircraft, and revenue of over \$16 billion, it had an unparalleled global network including eight major hubs and 5,500 daily flights to almost 400 destinations. In the wake of the merger, most of Vimanas' senior managers, including the CEO, left with large bonuses, seeking opportunities elsewhere. Meanwhile, furloughed pilots slowly began returning to work on the flight deck. Yet, far from restoring the organization to its early glory state, the last ten years have left a legacy of escalating demands for personal sacrifices.

Initially, these demands were ostensibly required to ensure the airline's immediate post-9/11 survival. However, they have endured—and in some ways intensified—with a profound effect on the piloting profession. Managerial restructuring and outsourcing strategies have put most of the younger pilots at major airlines like Vimanas on the street for prolonged periods, greatly undermining their job security and loyalty to their employer, substantially downgrading their working conditions and reducing their pay by sometimes as much as 60%. Since roughly one-third of airline costs are employee related slashing costs by cutting jobs has come to be seen as a 'natural' managerial solution for air carriers struggling in the hyper-competitive post-9/11 market (Gittell, Cameron, Lim and Rivas, 2006; Gittell, von Nordenflycht and Kochan, 2004).

Yet, two years after their merger Vimanas continued to report labour problems along with the worst operational record, least on-time arrivals and highest rate of regularly delayed flights, as well as more customer complaints than all other airlines combined (Mouawad, 2012). When asked about these discrepancies, Vimanas' new CEO blamed employees for undermining his new managerial vision: "You know, the cultural change takes time. And people resist change...What I want is those people to either change or leave" (Mouawad, 2012).

### **Cultural programmes, organizational controls and resistance**

Downsizing, restructuring and merging proves particularly demoralizing in organizations, like Vimanas, which had previously fostered a team oriented culture through various quality improvement programmes (Reynolds-Fisher and White, 2000; Ashcraft, 2007; Ashcraft, 2005; Author, 2005). These programmes had emphasized empowering employees, flattening organizational hierarchies, enhancing team-performance and reducing mistakes through better

communication and collaboration; all seen as keys to increasing productivity, profitability and safety (Author, 2011). Vimanas was an early leader in initiating these programmes in the 1980s and '90s, and its strong advocacy of a culture based on egalitarianism was envied by both managers and employees at other airlines. For these reasons, employees at Vimanas found the incongruence between pre-9/11 quality improvement philosophies and post-9/11 managerial restructuring strategies particularly alienating. This is not unprecedented; nearly all studies of downsized companies were found to encounter serious problems with employee morale and trust (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998) and downsized occupational groups are likely to display the increased bitterness and cynicism found here (Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). What makes the situation here particularly interesting is that downsizing and restructuring hit an elite group of professionals who had earlier been seduced into believing that their future was bright and safe, as members of the Vimanas 'family'.

A large number of studies (see, for example, Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas, 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1999; Driver, 2002; Fleming, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Author, 1999; Kunda, 1992; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Sturdy, 1998) have explored the effects of cultural development programmes on workplace dynamics and employee identities. Other scholars observed that employment relations influence workers' sense-of-self and capacity for agency, impacting the ways in which identity is constructed at work (Jaros, 2012; Siri & Groddeck, 2012). While some theorists, notably from the HRM perspective, argued that such programmes foster high employee commitment and enhanced organizational performance, most critical scholars agree that they exploit employees in even more insidious ways than direct surveillance by locking them into invisible psychic prisons aimed at ensuring increased profitability and organizational 'success' (Author, 2005). One way companies seek to accomplish this is through cultural practices and values that emphasize metaphors of team and family, thereby promoting their organization as caring communities (Casey, 1999; Author, 1999).

Who could possibly argue against teamwork, egalitarianism, quality and caring? Through various discursive strategies, employees are made to feel supported and privileged to be joining an elite group, one for which they should willingly make personal sacrifices and compromises. Eventually these sacrifices and compromises are taken for granted, becoming naturalized as elements of a privileged employee identity. On the basis of a study of an elite British parachute

regiment, Thornborrow and Brown (2009) argued that organizationally based discursive practices enabled paratroopers to identify with an idealized version of the regiment. In their constant aspiration to match this ideal and enjoy the elite status it accorded, paratroopers 'voluntarily' submitted to a system of self-discipline predetermined by this system. The regulatory effects of elite status were also explored by Alvesson and Robertson (2006) in a very different industry from elite military – consulting firms in the UK and Sweden. They identified different strategic and symbolic mechanisms deployed by senior members to construct an elite organizational identity, according to which consultants may be trusted to act in the interests of the firm. They noted that such elite constructions facilitated the promotion of self-discipline which sustained high standards of performance, long hours of work and a deep identification with the employer that afforded employees an 'ontological security' – a relatively secure sense of self.

Theories of workplace resistance have long been the flipside of theories of organizational controls. Like control, resistance assumes a bewildering range of expressions and it is theorized in many different ways (see, e.g. Collinson, 1994; Contu, 2008; Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Author, 2008; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Mulholland, 2004; Mumby, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). At one extreme, resistance can be romantically viewed as people's ability, individually and collectively, to stand up to tyranny and oppression; at the opposite extreme, resistance may be cast as directly or indirectly reinforcing the regimes of power it purports to challenge. What is beyond doubt is that different historical periods, different production regimes and different types of organization have spawned their specific types of employee resistance – effective or ineffective. These include strikes, picketing, workplace occupations, whistleblowing, work-to-rule, sabotage, pilfering, foot-dragging, absence from work, withholding of information, satire, and cynical withdrawal, among others. Enumerating different forms of resistance readily raises the question of what exactly counts as resistance. Does resistance have to be self-consciously opposed to managerial controls or could it merely be a demonstration of dissent or an affirmation of identity? Does it have to, at least in some manner, disrupt organizational routines or challenge some of its assumptions? And do token acts of indiscipline or insubordination count as resistance if they cause more damage to the employees than to management? Faced with such questions, some scholars (e.g. Mumby, 2005; Prasad & Prasad 2000) have suggested that resistance is socially



constructed and consequently socially contested: defining what counts as resistance is part of the struggle between the regimes of capitalist control and the forces of resistance. A particularly interesting issue here concerns 'exit' (or 'labour turnover', as it is usually known) – do people quitting oppressive or exploitative jobs represent resistance or capitulation (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Mulholland, 2004)? Alternatively, can this be seen simply as an organization's natural way of renewing itself, irrespective of whether employees are laid off or quit of their own accord? This is an issue of considerable importance in the present study, when, faced with intense job insecurity, drastic reduction of salaries and conditions of work, casualization and even deskilling some pilots opted to quit the company and start new jobs instead of confronting the company and its management more directly. What is particularly interesting about the way organizational restructuring and downsizing affected pilots is the way that an elite profession, one that had hitherto enjoyed extensive privileges and power, in a very short period of time saw these privileges erode and power disappear.

### **The field study**

This study began as part of a larger independent research project by the first author investigating aviation safety and working conditions in the post-9/11 period. As a former Vimanas Airline pilot herself, this researcher was able to gain insider access to Vimanas pilots through an online trade union forum, and quickly gained their trust and confidence. As a result, pilots were particularly forthcoming and detailed in their responses. Initially, thirty two semi-structured interviews with Vimanas captains and co-pilots were conducted between September 2010 and July 2011, lasting from one to two hours in length. Informants, all but one male, ranged in age from 32 to 63 years old and averaged 23 years of total aviation experience and an average of over 10,000 flight hours. In sum, they were all established professionals well-established in their airline career.

Over time, a subgroup of fifteen participants emerged from the initial interview group to form a more in depth study of how the experience of being laid off had affected them. These were pilots who had been furloughed *twice* by Vimanas Airline, first in 2001-2002 and then again in 2008-2009. Although all agreed to participate, ten were available during the allocated time period and were interviewed at greater length a second time. Pilots were invited to reflect on their careers and their experiences of being furloughed, to offer stories of critical incidents that marked turning points in their careers, to survey the changes in their profession since they

joined it and to offer advice to young people thinking of entering the aviation industry today. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. In addition, dozens of emails were exchanged with respondents to obtain extensive demographic data and to clarify discrepancies, expand discussion, and amplify points of interest as the authors deepened their analysis of the data.

Interviews were mainly non-directive. Informants were asked open-ended questions and encouraged to talk about their life, feelings, family, and work. In response, a broad spectrum of material was produced. Joining Stewart and Lucio (2011: 328) we sought “active and conscious worker voices” and their narratives in order to “highlight patterns of collective expressions of what work does to people, their various struggles to make sense of this together with their practical struggles against it”. Gradually, certain themes emerged. In line with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) we looked for surprising responses or for what Clarke et al (2009: 331) call “mutually antagonistic discursive resources”. For example, we wondered how pilots could express unequivocal hostility towards airline executives yet remain desperate to return to work at their airline.

We found employee-survivors did not fit neatly into any previously established “archetypes of survivor responses” (Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998: 569). Instead, complex and partly competing reality construction processes were at play suggesting simultaneous processes of resistance and compliance, subordination and autonomy, fear and hope, relief and cynicism. One of the consistent 'surprising and unanticipated' responses was the use of somatic terms and metaphors by pilots to describe different aspects of their experience as they moved from seeing themselves as members of a privileged professional elite to finding themselves 'on the street', unsure whether to wait to be recalled or make a sideways and unpredictable step into a new career. None of these images was as graphic or as powerful as the one that provided the inspiration for this paper and the one we presented in the opening of this article – the body snatchers.

## **Findings**

The data below are presented in three main sections, each representing a particular phase of the body snatcher process, namely seduction, disenchantment and resistance or capitulation. Thus, the first section introduces some of the ways in which regimes of power produced particular subjectivities among pilots at Vimanas as they became acculturated to the organization. This corresponds to the ‘snatching’ phase, in which the seductiveness of a Vimanas career and the

company's glamour and power worked their magic on the pilots' minds and bodies, paralysing the critical faculties of the former and turning the latter into willing signifiers of the corporate brand. The second examines some of the consequences of this embodiment, as escalating surveillance, outsourcing and attendant furloughs dramatically changed pilots' work experience. This corresponds to a realization that the company had been taken over by the corporate body snatchers, who demanded sacrifices. The third identifies the responses of Vimanas employees' which included some resistance, discursive, symbolic and material, corresponding to the Hollywood view of the heroes who resist the body snatchers or at least find ways of escaping from it. We ask what forms this resistance assume, what purposes it served and how effective it was.

### *Seduction and acculturation – The body snatchers' promise*

Vimanas sought to thoroughly immerse new recruits into its culture. This involved a complex process of psychic incorporation through flattery, promises and pledges aimed at making employees feel special (Casey, 1999; Reynolds-Fischer and White, 2000; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). For Vimanas Airlines, this acculturation process was greatly facilitated by pilots' earlier dreams of a career in aviation (often dating back to their childhood) and their idealization of Vimanas as the natural industry leader. Being invited to join this organization already inferred a kind of guarantee of a trouble-free rise to the top of their profession. Dreaming of an aviation career facilitated the implantation of body snatcher seed pods, priming pilots to readily adopt the company's discursive strategies as their own. Their identity quickly became coextensive with the airline. Thus, Christopher said simply that "being a Vimanas pilot is who I am, this is who I've always wanted to be". And Karen, a Vimanas first officer who grew-up in an aviation family and was now laid off, explained how central flying and working for Vimanas was to her identity:

I knew this was what I wanted to do from the time I was 5 years old... Flying is not only my job, but it's also my favourite hobby... It's not only what I do for a living, but it's what I do for fun.

Many respondents had aspired for years to join the ranks of Vimanas pilots, an epic journey to become something unique. As a result, gaining employment at Vimanas held an almost mystical allure: it represented the pinnacle of success. By joining Vimanas, their quest for a meaningful identity was complete – as long as their health held up, their rise to the top of their profession

was seen as guaranteed. This was an idea the airline's socialization regimes emphasized every time a new batch of recruits was hired. Thorpe described his first days at Vimanas:

We walked into a dinner and a captain stood up and looked at me—looked at all of us actually. And said, 'Welcome to the last uniform that you'll ever wear. Welcome to a great place to work for the rest of your life'. And I'll never forget what that felt like...I said 'This is it!'...I was as excited as I have probably ever been in my life.

Similarly, Anthony recalled his first days at Vimanas and how flight managers indoctrinated new pilots into the organization culture, helping them celebrate their career success:

[Flight managers said] 'You won the lottery. Burn your old [second-rate airline] uniforms, you'll never need another one...ker-ching, ker-ching [sound of cash register ringing] all the way home...They had a party for us and that was nice at the time. I really was on cloud-nine for that week...That was just a magical moment for me. That was the pinnacle!

Bill, another furloughed co-pilot, recalled managers welcoming new pilots on their first day with "Look around, you are in a room full of future millionaires." Similarly Charles, a furloughed pilot who subsequently resigned from Vimanas to accept employment at an Asian carrier, explained how happy he felt when he was first hired; the envy of others:

Once I joined Vimanas, I thought that I was going to be set for life. Good retirement, good benefits, good opportunities to fly nice equipment. Everything just seemed like I'd 'won the lottery'...I couldn't have been happier. I think everybody wanted to be a Vimanas pilot before 9/11.

Through the company's discursive devices, pilots were made to feel privileged that they were hired by Vimanas and *indebted* to the company: it was only through employment at Vimanas that they had reached the pinnacle. Yet, embedded in this discourse was an inference that in exchange for career stability and smooth progression, pilots would willingly make a variety of sacrifices and accommodations for the company's prosperity. Christopher exemplifies the seamless, apparently voluntary nature of this trade-off:

I was going to be a Vimanas pilot. It's as simple as that. And I've had that dream probably for 30 years...As the '80s and '90s wore on, the company got bigger and bigger. In 2000, Vimanas was the largest airline in the world. When I got hired, they had just been awarded the world's richest pilot contract. So,

you know, pinch me! I was like, 'Oh it's sweet. I'm done [job hopping]. I won't have to interview again. I can burn my interview suit. I can burn all my resumé's.

Similar references to 'burning the interview suit' and its replacement with a Vimanas' pilot uniform were made by several respondents and highlighted what they saw as their acceptance as full members into an organization *for life*, whose status, size and power rubbed off onto them and became a guarantee of their future success. Like other respondents, Christopher felt that employment at Vimanas meant a steady climb up the commercial pilot career ladder.

Far from feeling oppressed by employment within a large bureaucratic organization, pilots like Christopher felt comforted by the institutional structure Vimanas provided – stable career path, strong labour unions, clear work rules, fixed seniority lists, and orderly bidding processes for everything from vacation time to aircraft assignments. Dependence on the certainties of these arrangements made pilots particularly vulnerable to corporate body snatching. Thus, Tom, hired by Vimanas at just 26 years old, emphasized how taken for granted the rise to the top appeared when he had first been hired. He already envisaged the time when, at the age of 50-something, he would reach the top of the captain seniority list, enjoying unparalleled privilege, status and material rewards:

My dream kind of evolved from everything I had heard around me which was that ... [having started] at such a young age you're going to retire at the top. When you turn 60, you'll be sitting really well [as a senior captain]... I've a handful of friends who would have been number one [on the seniority list] for a week or a month or so. I would have been number 40-something and- and now it's going to be ...[uncertainty] - well there's no telling.

Like Tom, many respondents recalled how their acculturation process was shaped by things they heard during their first days at work, often from senior captains and flight managers – ideas that became embedded in their expectations and aspirations to produce particular types of subjectivities among them; subjectivities that were totally aligned with their company: pliant, conformist but also inflated and spoilt.

Embedded in Tom's comments is a subjectivity incorporating both an initial hope born out of total faith in the company and a sense of entitlement as well as a subsequent uncertainty when what were assumed to be firm promises failed to materialize. Even after experiencing two

prolonged periods of lay-off, many furloughed pilots like Tom held on to their precious seniority number as the ticket that would get them back to work, albeit on substantially worse terms and with their trust in company leadership considerably shaken. Dehumanizing as ‘being a number’ can be, for pilots like Tom their airline seniority number was a comforting signifier of their standing in Vimanas long after the company's early promises had been irrevocably broken.

Following the collapse of the US aviation industry in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and its subsequent re-structuring and rationalization, pilots like Tom found themselves in a limbo-like state. Instead of moving smoothly from first officer up to the captain's seat on the flight deck, they found themselves out of the cockpit altogether, not knowing if or when they would be recalled to work and on what terms. They waited in simmering frustration until their seniority number came up for recall, taking temporary jobs in construction, taxi-driving, and car salesmen or downgrading to regional air carriers flying smaller planes at a fraction of their earlier salaries. About a third of those interviewed eventually gave up on Vimanas and accepted permanent (and mostly well-paid and successful) jobs in related industries, where their earlier piloting experience was seen as an asset.

### ***Unexpected Consequences: The body snatchers show their hand***

Vimanas' discursive strategy which had earlier cast the company as a family (Casey, 1999) ensuring the wellbeing of its members with pilots guaranteed a safe future changed dramatically in the decade after 9/11. As Author (1999) observed, family metaphors easily mutate into prison metaphors in which individuals feel oppressed but also unable to move on. Their identity is so tightly linked to their employer in whom they have invested so much materially and emotionally that leaving is extremely difficult. This was the situation that Vimanas pilots now faced. Once a regime of layoffs, restructuring and downsizing took hold, furloughed pilots, without an airline to work for or an airplane to fly, no longer felt like pilots. For some, this loss of identity as a Vimanas pilot was devastating. Greg was hired by Vimanas about eight years after earning his aviation college degree and flew there for three years before being furloughed and recalled twice over an eight year period:

When I'm not flying or when I wasn't working, I became just normal Joe Schmoe [a nobody] ... Every day I go outside, I look at the sky and I see an airplane ... It's like getting punched in the stomach ... It's a constant reminder of what I wasn't doing.

Like Greg, several other pilots experienced furlough as a bodily attack. For instance, Aaron felt decapitated:

There was a letter that went out and then there was a phone call. I knew [the layoff] was happening but that phone call felt like the guillotine blade was coming down... All the worst scenarios went around in my head ... I was very scared.

And Karen seemed buried alive in her parents' basement following the shattering of her dream:

My identity was tied up in being a pilot so being an 'unemployed pilot' made me feel really bad about myself and really sad. I felt this deep loss of my career... losing my dream job... I was living in an apartment and so I moved into my parents' basement for free [in order to survive].

The body snatcher imagery is particularly revealing here. Like Tom, Greg, Aaron and Karen relate how the loss of their Vimanas pilot identity thrust them into a state over which they had no control; only their airline could release them. It was as if their bodies had been taken over, used, and then discarded, an idea which was extremely painful to cope with particularly when juxtaposed against their earlier exhilaration and sense of achievement. Many of the pilots in our study saw themselves as having sustained a severe trauma and were prepared to talk about it at length.

When pilots in our study were subsequently recalled to fly again for Vimanas, the company they encountered had changed substantially, wrapped up in "constant turmoil" with its employees "distracted," "beat down," and pushed to the "breaking point." As Vimanas new CEO succinctly put it, their choice was "to change or to leave" (Mouawad, 2012). Surveillance became "almost punitive and pervaded the whole environment" which "made people even more angry." Henry, a former military pilot had risen to captain, but wound up back in the co-pilot seat following the airline's drastic downsizing. Frustrated by this demotion, he left Vimanas for an Asian airline. Henry emphasized how managerial strategies after 9/11 created a toxic work environment:

Before 9/11 ... Quality of life was very good. I enjoyed the people I was working with. Going flying was a good thing ... Immediately after 9/11, things were dramatically different ... Going to work was becoming a drag. It was [caused by] really, really bad management and really poor decisions by senior

management ... Everybody from gate agents, flight attendants, mechanics, ramp guys and the other pilots, of course. Nobody was happy ... It became a really unpleasant environment to be in.

Kevin, a military reserve pilot and Vimanas first officer, offered further evidence of the growing organizational toxicity, noting ways the employee-management relationship had soured after 9/11:

When I was first at Vimanas [in 1997] I didn't feel like I was at odds with management. I knew there was a 'labor-versus-management' perspective, but there always appeared to be an ability to work that out. In the last decade, that doesn't seem to be the case ... [Airline executives] are just ruthless. They don't care about their employees. They are sold out to a buck. It has become a 'me-versus-you' industry.

Similarly, Charles emphasized the growing sense of threat and resultant fear these changes wrought. Notice how Charles, along with the other respondents, obsessively compared the current situation with the pre-9/11, idealizing the latter and demonising the former:

Pre-9/11, it seemed like anything was possible and things were always going to get better and better. There was no end in sight ... A very optimistic point of view. Post-9/11, I just hope that I can keep what I have. But it always seems like things are getting worse and worse ... There's always the threat that if you don't fall in line, we'll get rid of you. They use the training department as their stick to keep you in line. I never had that fear at Vimanas pre-9/11.

These comments reflect management's changing rhetoric from one of employee development and career enhancement to one of discipline and even retribution. Employees who had bought into the imagery of stability, success, and material rewards at Vimanas pre-9/11, now found themselves very much in an 'us versus them' situation, in which the notion that managers and staff were all members of a family, happy or otherwise, would have been seen as laughable.

A central feature of the new power regime was a dramatic erosion of the pilots' authority, something that had started in earlier decades, but which now reached a peak. Many pilots told stories of the captain's authority being questioned by managers, security staff, and even other employees. "It's insane", Doug a twice furloughed copilot said:



A customer service agent [would never] question the captain's authority [before 9/11]...I mean it's crazy, you know. I absolutely believe that it's by design by management. They give [power] to all these work groups, who are pissed off at each other. I don't know [where it will lead].

Similar stories of erosion of pilot authority were heard from many of our respondents. They also noted how the public image of the profession had suffered as a result of high profile media stories of pilots getting to work in an inebriated state or being engrossed in conversations and overshooting runways or landing in the wrong airport.

Overall we observe that, in recent years, a cultural discourse seeking employee commitment through acculturation was replaced by a downsizing discourse emphasizing efficiency through cost-cutting and outsourcing which depleted pilots' authority and status, seriously undermining their salaries and work conditions and consigning them to long periods without work. The body snatching process shifts from promising a stable and successful career path in exchange for worker loyalty, to waking up to the realities of being either physically used and discarded or in the middle of a toxic stew in which bodies mysteriously disappear, as pilots leave the profession for one reason or another. The body snatchers' promise has led to the loss of everything that was human about the organization.

A persistent theme that emerged was a nostalgic recollection of the 'organization of old', prior to the arrival of the body snatchers (Brown and Humphreys, 2002, 2006; Author, 1993; Strangleman, 1999, 2007). A split thus occurs between the idealized organization that they had joined and Vimanas of today, the former endowed with every perfection, the latter with every defect. A radical discontinuity separates the two, one whose effects cannot be undone and one which is consistently identified with the trauma of the 9/11 attacks. Between today's airline and the organization of old there is a chasm that cannot be closed. The notion that the body snatchers were already at work before 9/11 is not one that can be contemplated.

### ***Resistance – Standing up to the snatchers ... belatedly***

Throughout the period of restructuring and downsizing, overt active resistance by the pilots and their unions was minimal. Most of them acknowledged that the first wave of furloughs immediately after 9/11 was inevitable and throughout the subsequent period attempts to oppose mergers, downsizing and outsourcing were limited. There were very few incidents of picketing or industrial action. The pilot union even gave its consent to one of the most controversial

measures, the extension of the pilot retirement age from 60 to 65 which had a devastating effect on the career and work prospects of younger pilots.

In spite of the absence of overt resistance, our interviews indicated that there was widespread opposition to the post-9/11 business model. In the first instance, pilots almost unanimously denounced executive decisions and managerial strategies and voiced their condemnations vociferously on professional online forums and social media. The vehemence of these denunciations took the authors somewhat by surprise; it is rare to see professional groups express such vitriol against their employers and managers. In addition to the strength of feeling, what surprised us was the articulacy of their criticisms and the extent to which they embraced the profit motive, corporate management and even, as the opening quote suggests, American capitalism in general. All of this indicated a rapid radicalisation of a profession that had earlier been willing fodder for the body snatchers.

One pilot noted, managers “are in a completely different world” from rank-and-file employees both in terms of pay and exposure to risk. “Managers just care about themselves, not the airlines.” It is notable that much of the furloughed pilots' rancour concerned the company's 'greed', i.e. its single-minded pursuit of the bottom line. This may well represent a projection of the pilots own greed in their earlier relation with the company.<sup>2</sup> When asked about the roots of this organizational discord, Anthony provided a common response:

I blame management, bad management, greedy management ... Rather than looking at what's going to make this a great company in the long run, they say what's going to make us a buck today? ... [We] get one CEO after another ... They want to outsource everything. They want to outsource the flying. They want to outsource the maintenance ... All they would like to do is to sell a ticket and make a dollar. If they had no pilots, no flight attendants, no airplanes, they would be happy [because] they don't really want to be an airline.

Similarly, Charles recalled:

I don't know what business Vimanas executives have been in the last five years but I don't think it was the airline business. ... I don't think these people care. They are only interested in making money—more, more, more money—for

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<sup>2</sup> We are thankful to one of the article's three anonymous reviewers for this perceptive observation.

themselves and that's all they care about. They really didn't care about the success or failure of the company.

Like the seed pods that invaded Santa Mira from outer space, employees' bodies were just a resource for managerial body snatchers to exploit. Emphasizing how alien this type of thinking seemed to the pilot population when compared to pre-9/11 rhetoric, Charles, with bitter irony, is willing to breach the ultimate aviation taboo, and accuse management of compromising air safety:

Maybe those management people have figured out that they can afford to crash one airplane every two years and they don't care because they're not riding on the airplane. Maybe that's what it comes down to; you have these new kind of managers.

Generalized hostility, anger and highly articulate criticisms of managerial strategies clearly represent a degree of 'resistance through distance', a type of resistance noted by Collinson (1994: 37) through which "workers [seek] to deny any involvement in or responsibility for the running of the organization." This resulted in a general attitude of non-cooperation or foot-dragging (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), as described by Aaron:

Before 9/11, I was always willing to help out the company if they called me and needed a favour. Post-9/11, when I went back [to work from furlough], I was never willing to help out. I felt like I'd been burned by the company, burned by the union. I just wanted to do my job and go home.

Several pilots interviewed sought to claim a moral high ground in an effort to reclaim some dignity and sustain their identities (Collinson, 1994; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). They explained that it was not pay cuts, employee furloughs or loss of benefits that were most unsettling to them. It was managerial strategies undertaken after downsizing to indoctrinate the surviving employees into the new organizational processes that troubled them most. As Pors (2012) noted, the more managers attempted to exert control, the less likely their new programs would produce the desired effect.

One such scheme was a mandatory programme designed to teach workers how hard managerial decisions were during bankruptcy. This too was vehemently resisted through non-participation and cynical distancing, some pilots describing it as "'Business 101' for kindergartners." Appalled that Vimanas spent millions of dollars on the scheme while

furloughing employees and cutting wages, our respondents viewed it as a clumsy attempt at recolonization, something that bitter experience had taught them to resist. Having to attend this training unpaid on their day off added insult to injury and, as Karen described it, the programme backfired badly:

The cost of developing that course to basically try to convince Vimanas employees that our management had done a fabulous job during bankruptcy was \$20 million—they admitted it. Developing that course and shoving everyone through it, cost the company \$20 million. To go play a stupid board game and force Kool-Aid down employees' throats. They had riots breaking out...They discontinued it about 4 months into it because they realized it was just making the employees so upset. They had to call the police so many times—they really did.

Such forms of opposition, coherent, articulate and very angry, contrasts with studies of other professional groups reporting that once workers commit themselves to a corporate ideology they often blame themselves for their troubles, unable to distinguish between their own and the corporate interests (Driver, 2002; Casey, 1999; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). Among our respondents, there *was absolutely no self-blame*. Consistent with the body snatcher imagery, one does not blame oneself for having one's body colonized by an invisible parasite. The awareness of the parasite and the subsequent devastation it wrought to their lives radicalised the pilots enough to resist attempts at further colonization.

In this respect, the pilots' vehement anger and indignation (rarely reported in studies of other professional groups), their dismissive ridiculing of managerial discourses and their retreat into 'realism' and instrumentality offer some evidence that the work of the body snatchers was not all smooth running. Consistent with Kondo (1990), we found that a large part of resistance takes place inside the mechanisms of power (the pilots after all continued to fly planes, don corporate uniforms or exited to seek employment in related industries) rather than outside, we noted a radicalisation of the profession that makes a return to naïve acculturation and indoctrination in future unlikely.

Beyond resistance through distance, twelve (of 32) of the pilots interviewed took matters into their own hands and sought employment elsewhere. This was by no means easy, as their aspirations had been pinned on Vimanas. Thus, Henry reported:

I didn't have confidence that the airline was going to survive, based on the things they were doing and the people who were running the place. It looked to me like Vimanas was in a death spiral...The environment at Vimanas had become—nobody was happy, so going to work was becoming a drag. It was, what I felt, really really bad management and really poor decisions by senior management people. It looked like a really good time to go do something else...So I took the voluntary furlough.

*Exiting* may be the only alternative available to employees caught in what Author (2012) described as miasmatic organizations, where many they find their will to fight sapped, as depression and despondency take hold. What is more contentious is whether exit can be regarded as a form of resistance. The option of quitting an organization experienced as a prison may represent a small moral victory for an individual. Equally, however, it can be a self-destructive gesture costing much to the individual and little to his or her employer. Indeed, it may be playing into the hands of management, offering them a chance to replace older, disenchanted, expensive employees with younger and more compliant ones. Instead of resistance, exit under such circumstances would represent a victory for the body snatchers, as they draw in fresh recruits, eager to be seduced and colonized.

A more active and, arguably, more damaging type of resistance is described by Christopher, who used his forced exit as an opportunity to raise his voice in dissent. Upon receiving his furlough notice, he decided to make his plight as visible and as painful to his superiors as possible:

[You] didn't actually have to physically come in [to sign off] unless [you] wanted to. I wanted to ... because I wanted people to see that I was a human being and that I was losing my job ... I wanted them to see this person is taking a 100% pay cut again. It's not a [seniority] number in a union posting - it's a person ... I was biting my tongue. I was literally choking back tears ... I just didn't feel like getting treated like a piece of garbage ... I think I left with my dignity.

In spite of its emotional and symbolic power, it is questionable whether gestures like those of Christopher cause any serious disruption to managerial regimes or their downsizing discourses. His resistance, for resistance undoubtedly it was, must be viewed broadly in what Collinson

(1994) described as resistance aimed at recrafting selfhood and protecting identity rather than challenging managerial regimes. The same can be said of virtually all resistance we encountered in this piece of research. We would hesitate, however, to describe such resistance as 'decaf resistance' (Contu, 2008) since it obviously carried a considerable personal cost and sacrifice. Its effectiveness was limited but not nil. Management, for instance, would hesitate before commissioning another 'development programme' following the fiasco of the one described above.

In conclusion, the third phase of the body snatching process clearly removed the scales from Vimanas pilots' eyes, it shattered what had been idealized images of the organization, and drove some pilots to seek employment elsewhere. Resistance against Vimanas management was limited mostly to resistance through distance, involving extreme emotional expressions of hostility and disgust, a questioning of management's moral authority to run the organization, an unwillingness to co-operate or show goodwill and a deep mistrust of any initiative that originated in the company's management.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Corporations today deploy complex and subtle sets of workplace controls, aimed at transforming each employee into a self-regulating, self-policing subject of organizational power through pervasive normative means (e.g. Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ashcraft, 2005; Casey, 1999; Clarke et al., 2009; Author, 1999; Thomas and Davies, 2005a). Several studies have demonstrated that corporate culture acts as a powerful controlling mechanism, enabling employees to feel that they are fulfilling their own independent career and developmental aspirations by moulding their very sense of selfhood and identity even as they serve the corporate agenda (Driver, 2002; Casey, 1999; Author, 1999; Casey, 1996; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Grey and Garsten, 2001; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Pedersen, 2008; Sturdy, 1998). This moulding process not only shapes employees' views and outlooks but also constructs what Hancock and Tyler (2000) term 'organizational bodies', which assume appearances, movements, postures, accoutrements and accessories that turn workers into material expressions of a corporate ideal.

The disciplining effects of organizational identification have long been appreciated (cf. Friedman's (1977) concept of 'responsible autonomy'). What is new here is the view that this "general strategy of power" amounts to a *biopower*, "an explosion of numerous and diverse

techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault, 1978, 140). The human body, its health, appearance, fitness, movements, accessories and so forth, thus becomes a product of what Foucault (1988) calls the 'technologies of the self' - politics becomes biopolitics. Applying Foucault's theory premises to organization studies, Author (1999: 185) noted that "today's organizations have or at least aim for total control over their employees, their hearts and minds as well as their bodies". Suggesting these controls are "more invasive, pervasive, and insidious than those of earlier eras", Author argued that employers now "colonize the individual from within rather than from above or from outside" (185). The term 'colonization' is not accidental (see Deetz, 1992). Like body snatcher pods, the disciplinary powers of today's workplaces install themselves in the employees' bodies, dictating what it means to be fit, healthy, appropriately gendered and aged, appropriately dressed, appropriately behaved, properly equipped with various technical accoutrements, regularly present and always available to work.

Inspired by Deleuze (1992), Cederström and Fleming (2012: 17) use a different metaphor to describe the same phenomenon – "the corporation," they argue "is now everywhere, it is a spirit, a gas" that permeates everything. People who breathe the corporation in its gaseous form are not merely at its beck and call 24 hours per day – their bodies are actually working 24 hours per day. The use of terms like colonization and images like body snatching and gaseous infiltration are not meant to suggest the invasion of a pre-existing and a hitherto virgin territory by an *external force*. On the contrary, consistent with postcolonial theory, colonization refers to a process that may start with invasion but creates new categories (including 'primitive', 'uncivilized' and 'virgin') that obliterate alternative ways of acting and thinking and entrap colonizer and colonized.

Few organizations represent those entrapping, seducing and colonizing qualities of 'the corporation' to a more advanced degree than US airlines. Since their early days, these organizations have not only consciously and strategically worked on their image and corporate mythology (see Durepos et al 2008) but have, in their own division of labour, encapsulated and defined the gendered practices of the corporate order. Men have been firmly at the helm in roles that entailed a "tough and aggressive leadership style" coupled with strict submission to corporate discipline while a "notion of womanhood was constructed from narrow lenses that rarely cast women as anything more than lovers, wives, and mothers." (Mills and Mills 2006:

42). More recently, as Ashcraft (2005, 2007) has demonstrated, senior pilots have resisted what they viewed as an encroachment on their authority by shifting their subject positions from infallible God-like figures of authority to caring team leaders. In this way they have defended their elite gendered identities as fatherly professionals by imbibing the corporate ideology of teamwork, diversity, caring and so forth. Ashcraft notes how a pilot's uniform becomes a powerful symbol 'on his body' (2007: 23) that maintains and supports his authority over both passengers and crew. "Donning a ship captain's uniform and associated props, such as formal rank titles and loudspeakers for pilot-passenger communication, the pilot's body [is] transformed into that of an elite officer" (2007:18).

Nor should it be thought that pilots are the only ones whose bodies act as material expressions of their authority and the organization that employs them. In a study of cabin crew, Hancock and Tyler (2000: 120) use the term 'organizational bodies' to describe the way that the bodies of airline employees "are constituted and presented in line with organizational directives...to represent the materialized expression of an organizational cultural ideal to which they all contributed and, as such, mutually regulated". These organizational bodies become cultural "artifacts of the organization, much as the corporate logos or the design of the aircraft interiors...serving to form and communicate a collective organizational identity both amongst its members and to its paying clients".

The conversion of ordinary bodies into organizational bodies is seen by Hancock and Tyler (2000) as the task of aesthetic management, or in the guiding metaphor of this paper, the work of the body snatchers. The smiling face, the impeccably ironed uniform, the well-groomed hair, the upright posture, a myriad of movements, and the constant self-monitoring of bodily presentation are all aspects of an embodied and gendered subject, disciplined but also authorized to act as a representative of the corporation he/she serves (Casey, 2000). Airlines like Vimanas have been especially adept at this process, building loyalty and exercising control by colonizing employees from the inside as well as the outside. They do not merely superimpose a number of habits, behaviours, emotional orientations and beliefs on a pre-existing subject, but they mould this subject so that he or she can only see themselves through the eyes of their employer.

Capitalizing on early dreams of a piloting career with the elite status it accords and the material and symbolic rewards that are assumed to go with it, Vimanas acted like body snatcher pods, appropriating pilots' bodies and turning them into visible signifiers of their corporate



brand. By joining Vimanas, pilots were encouraged to feel that they were members of an elite team, a group that others envied. As a result, in line with Casey (1999), Thornborrow and Brown (2009), and Clarke et al (2012), we observed that employees actively participated in their own acculturation, constructing their work identities through a complicated combination of desires and aspirations, practices and self-disciplines. Acculturation, akin to the “*society of normalization*” (Foucault and Gordon, 1980: 107), was sustained through company parties, stories, congratulatory speeches, slogans, metaphors, jokes and hype, all reinforcing an image of stability, success, and material rewards. Such discursive practices aimed at masquerading submission to organizational disciplines as empowerment.

Prior to 9/11, organizational members voluntarily sought to achieve company goals that they had internalized as their own. Far from feeling oppressed by this experience, Vimanas pilots reported feeling pleasure at work, anchored in the institutional order they inhabited. As a result, they were willing to make the sacrifices airline executives demanded of them in exchange for admission to the elite club. Indeed, most pilots were unaware of making sacrifices until *after* they were laid off, when they found themselves adrift in a toxic environment. Throughout the process of restructuring, downsizing and outsourcing, there was little or no overt resistance on the part of the pilots – as members of a professional elite with highly individualistic outlooks and a keen identification with their employer, they displayed none of the micro-political challenges to managerial regimes reported by Thomas and Davies (2005a; 2005b) and others.

Following downsizing and restructuring, the assumption of being part of a familial community came crashing down to be replaced by the stark realities of insecurity, uncertainty and surveillance. Vimanas pilots' response to this new regime was *mixed*. On the one hand, they consistently maintained their idealized image of the airline that had initially recruited them, often shrouding it in nostalgia. On the other hand, they denigrated its current leaders as ruthless carpetbaggers who had seized power and used it to advance their own interests at the expense of the organization. In this manner, Vimanas pilots were able to identify a subtle yet clear distinction between their commitment to the idealized air carrier that they had flown for and the actual company that airline executives were (mis)managing. The body snatchers were thus seen as having taken possession not only of Vimanas workers but of the organization ecosystem itself.

The concept of splitting which enables individuals simultaneously to identify with and distance themselves from the same object is now beginning to interest organizational theorists

and other social commentators. Splitting, however, has long been familiar to psychoanalysis as a fundamental form of defence against anxiety. Originally proposed by Freud, the defence of splitting became a cornerstone of Melanie Klein's work and subsequent object relations theory (Fairbairn, 1952/1994; Klein, 1950). Splitting is the result of mental conflict and involves the separation of a real or imagined object (a person, an organization, an idea) into two contrasted ones, one which is 'all-good', the other being 'all-bad'. In this way, people defend themselves against the experience that many objects have both positive and negative sides, indeed that the very qualities that make them good in some circumstances can make them bad in different ones. The defence of splitting is a 'primitive' one, occurring very early in a person's life when their ego and identity are relatively unformed, and can subsequently return when they experience very acute anxieties under circumstances of extreme uncertainty. Splitting may be deployed at the individual level or may become a collective defence when a group together idealize and degrade a shared object.

Splitting is a means of avoiding ambivalence which is almost inevitably accompanied by distressing feelings of guilt and anxiety. It offers the solace of a simple opposition between good and evil, and represents an inability or unwillingness to engage with the complexities of different social situations, opting instead for sharp polarizations. In the case of the pilots in this study, the split between the ideal Vimanas of old and its dark double today, helped them maintain a commitment to the piloting profession, while enabling them to resist, however indirectly or ineffectively, organizational efforts at body snatching. This resistance which assumed various forms—anger and dismay voiced on on-line networks and mailing lists, vehement criticism of management, foot-dragging, non-cooperation, and, as a last resort exit—did not affect their idealization of the organization as a symbol of success, caring and goodness.

This article has focused on the experiences of a relatively small group of professionals who found themselves lured into a profession by their love of flying and the promise of safe material and symbolic rewards in a predictable and orderly career. Their early career success bound them to their employer and paralysed many of their critical qualities – like the victims of the body snatchers, they readily became self-disciplined conformists, their bodies turned into proud signifiers of the corporate brand. Later, however, when lay-offs, career derailments, demotions and misfortune struck them, they rediscovered some critical qualities – in short, when it was (almost) too late they rediscovered their critical distance in the face of organizational

controls. The experiences of these pilots echo the predicament of earlier groups of elite workers (or 'aristocracies of labour') like those of early 19<sup>th</sup> century handloom weavers in Great Britain who found themselves thrown out of work by technological and social developments brought about by the industrial revolution (Smelser, 1959; Thompson, 1968). The pilots' experiences may also foreshadow trends in other professional groups (including academics) that have enjoyed material and symbolic privileges and have overlooked the changing social and organizational circumstances, blinded partly by love for their work (Clarke et al., 2012). Faced with increasing uncertainty and insecurity, such groups may fail to overcome or contest them (Collinson, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), until it is too late and they discover that their privileges as well as their dreams have been irretrievably lost.

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