

The Novel as Affective Site

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The novel as affective site: uncertain work as impasse in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*

Birke Otto and Anke Strauss

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Abstract

In this paper we propose that reading and writing with novels contributes to the emerging field of researching affect in organisation studies. Situating our argument in current research on work-related uncertainty, we take John Fante's novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as a 'sensuous site' of research to engage with the experience of feeling stuck – addressed as impasse, limbo or permanent temporariness – as a condition of contemporary work lives. While affect theoretical approaches often emphasize precognitive intensities and their transformative potential, the novel foregrounds how affective intensities stay and stick as they are entangled with powerful socio-political conventions, such as investments in the American Dream or the idea of stable employment. Such affective attachments take shape in antithetic dynamics of the not-so-static state of feeling stuck.

Keywords: uncertain work, Berlant, impasse, affect, novel, sensuous site, crisis ordinary

Introduction*

[P]urgatory, that midway place between hell and heaven, disturbed him. [...] In purgatory there was one consolation: sooner or later you were a cinch for heaven. But when [he] realized that his stay in purgatory might be seventy million trillion billion years, burning and burning and burning, there was little consolation in ultimate heaven. After all, a hundred years was a long time. And a hundred and fifty million years was incredible (Fante, 1938/2007, p. 80).

Wait Until Spring, Bandini is a novel written by John Fante in the 1930s about the absence of work in everyday life. Its portrait of a family stuck in an ongoing ‘crisis ordinary’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 8) constituted by the lack of a secure frame of reference provided by paid work strongly resonates with contemporary experiences of work-related uncertainty. Studies on work uncertainty show that it has become increasingly rare for people to enjoy a stable framework of work organisation that continuously shapes their working life for extended periods, and the feeling of uncertainty now pervades most forms of employment (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Pugh, 2015; Saloniemi & Zeytinoglu, 2007). Uncertainty has become an experiential norm, if not an existential threat, for people across professions, localities and milieus.

Existing literature in organisation studies addresses this experiential dimension of uncertain work arrangements predominately in relation to emotional, identity-related, discursive or material aspects of the predicament (e.g. Koene, Garsten, & Galais, 2014; De Cuyper et al., 2008; Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Collinson, 2003; Marler, Woodard Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002). This experience is presented ambiguously as causing stress, anxiety and exhaustion on the one hand and lauded as autonomy, freedom, and a spur to creativity on the other. Particularly interesting here are those contributions that link uncertainty to sensations emanating from feelings of being trapped, stuck, in limbo, or permanently liminal as conditions of contemporary work lives (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, & McCormack, 2017; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Ybema, Beech, & Ellis, 2011; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Garsten, 1999). It thus seems that many contemporary work experiences share the feeling that one of Fante’s characters expresses about purgatory, which he refers to as a ‘midway place between hell and heaven’ in which one is stuck indefinitely. It corresponds to what literary scholar Berlant (2011) refers to as *impasse* – a condition experienced as an extended present of uncertainty that permanently circulates across various arrangements of contemporary lives while people remain invested in the fraying ideals of a good life.

* We are immensely grateful to three anonymous reviewers for their outstanding constructive and encouraging feedback that clearly shaped the argument of this paper. We also would like to thank the editors of this special issue for supporting our work and making this special issue happen.

We suggest complementing existing approaches to uncertain work arrangements with an affect-theoretical engagement with novels to explore this seemingly collective notion of being stuck. Studying novels has become an established practice in organisation studies (e.g. Case & Gaggiotti, 2016; Land & Śliwa, 2009; De Cock & Land, 2006; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999;) that claims that literary work offers important insights about organizational life, such as making organizational scholars more sensitive to and aware of the role of affect and embodied experiences in organizing (e.g. Ratner, Bojesen, & Bramming, 2014, p. 78; see also Steyaert, 2015; Munro & Huber, 2012). Affect in organisation studies is often theorised based on a concern with the transformative capacities of precognitive intensities and embodied experiences (e.g. Fotaki, Kenny & Vachhani, 2017; Beyes & Steyaert, 2012). Relating our contribution to these arguments, we complement such studies of affect that emphasize emergence and becoming (e.g. Fotaki & Pullen, 2019; Beyes & DeCock, 2017) with a particular interest in how such affective intensities stay and stick.

Fante's realist fiction on a family's daily survival during the Great Depression, a situation famously marked by the absence of stable work, makes vivid the feeling of being stuck in uncertain work arrangements. In dramatizing this state of permanent temporariness, the novel lets the reader experience how the impasse, perhaps paradoxically, is dynamic. Fante's novel constitutes an affective, sensuous site that allows us to grasp the non-obviousness of the affective components of this predicament. He does so by his specific style of writing that assembles different perspectives, times, dreams, places, names, feelings, thoughts and talk into splitting and shifting spotlights on different human and non-human characters, temporalities and sites, so that each character becomes several in contact with others. Hence, instead of constituting the protagonists as independent and fixed subjects, Fante's writing allows grasping them as effects of ongoing relational enactments always shifting, drifting, changing – yet simultaneously producing sediments that are slow enough for us to perceive them as actors who find forms of affective attachments to the fantasies that surround, infuse, move or fix them. Here, we identify crucial similarities to current research on feeling stuck indefinitely in contemporary work lives. But unlike discursive or identity-based approaches on such an impasse (e.g. Bamber et al., 2017; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014), an affect-theoretical approach allows us to consider that feeling stuck can neither be attributed to uncertain work arrangements alone, nor exclusively conceptualised as an individual identity struggle. Fante's novel, instead, makes us sensitive to the powerful role of (fraying) fantasies of the American Dream or stable employment for the experience of being stuck and which gain their powerful stickiness through individual and collective affective attachments. It also allows capturing intensities and movements within and beyond those attachments and exploring how a prolonged state of uncertainty is dynamic through changing conditions and new opportunities.

Lastly, reading and writing with the novel creates resonances between fictitious and non-fictitious bodies that allows the reader to feel out the predicament of being stuck in uncertain work arrangements. Assuming that Fante's realist fiction contributes to uttering a 'collective story about the personal that is not organised by the singular autobiography' (Berlant, 2008, p. ix-x), reading the novel has the capacity to experience personally what is collective, general and contemporary about managing work lives in uncertain times. Those collective qualities of the novel as sensuous site are affectively apprehensible and have the political potential to at least tentatively build 'new forms of mutuality and relatedness' across generations, across time and place (McLean, 2011). It suggests that getting unstuck is a collective rather than an individual challenge that goes beyond immediate questions of economic survival in that it necessitates an affective politics dealing with the powerful attachment to shared fantasies, such as stable employment or the American Dream.

The uncertain experiences of contemporary work lives

Discussions are well-established on a proliferation of uncertain work arrangements, a term that we use to denote all forms of (un)employment that cause experiences of uncertainty: temp work, nonstandard employments, casual work, unemployment and other employment uncertainties (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Koene et al., 2014; Bauman, 2000, Beck, 2000). A combination of neoliberal labour market reforms, new technologies, de-unionisation and the discourses of flexibility and risk have changed existing structures of post-war employment stability in contemporary Western society such that expectations of permanent employment can no longer be considered status quo (Beck, 2000). Some critics claim that numbers do not confirm an increase in insecure employment (Fevre, 2007), and they call naive both the lumping together of unequal experiences of different professions, classes, gender, age and race (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Atkinson, 2010; Cooper, 2008) and any faith in the promises of a long-gone industrial society (Strangemann, 2007). Yet there is consensus that the experience of contemporary work is increasingly shaped by perceived job insecurity 'regardless of working in a fixed-term or permanent contract' (Saloniemi & Zeytinoglu, 2007, p. 125, see also Pugh, 2015; Tweedie, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009). Uncertainty is thus not only an economic condition for many, but has become an 'insecurity culture' (Pugh, 2015, 4), an experiential norm and a 'hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves' (Butler, 2015, p. vii) across professions, localities and milieus (Strauß & Fleischmann, forthcoming).

Existing literature in organisation studies addresses this experiential dimension of uncertain work arrangements predominately in regard to the emotional, identity-related, discursive or material aspects of the predicament (Ashford et al., 2007). For example, scholars have highlighted how the post-bureaucratic setting of contemporary workplaces yields pervasive power relations that produce insecure and fragile identities (Collinson, 2003). Studies

on psychological effects find that work experiences in ‘nonstandard employment’ cause stress or sickness linked to a perceived loss of control (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Marler et al., 2002; Parker, Griffin, Sprigg, & Wall, 2002), a condition that reaches far beyond the workplace (Ashford et al., 2007). Others highlight the simultaneity of contradictory discourses that feed uncertain work arrangements and create interrelated experiences of autonomy, freedom and creativity on the one hand, and insecurity and inequality that lead to stress, anxiety and exhaustion, on the other (Umney & Kretsos, 2015; Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010; Garsten, 1999).

In many empirical and theoretical accounts of work-related uncertainty, one finds an explicit or implicit reference to a specific normative frame expressed, for example, in the academic’s belief in the merit of relentless work (Ashcraft, 2017; Bristow, Robinson, & Ratle, 2017), the temp worker’s hope to eventually enter a career in a large company (Garsten, 1999), or the creative worker’s compromises for a future of fame and recognition (Umney & Kretsos, 2015). This aspiration is also expressed in the enduring theoretical concept of ‘standard employment’ as that which still seems to constitute the norm (Koene et al., 2014; Ashford et al., 2007). Here, an historically contingent ideal of secure work arrangements becomes the measure of experience, which shapes the understanding *and* experience of uncertainty (Kalleberg & Vagas, 2018).

This perhaps explains what has recently become a recurrent theme in contributions across diverse work settings: a pervasive notion of ‘feeling stuck’ (Costas, 2013), ‘locked-in’ (Bamber et al., 2017), or ‘in occupational limbo’ (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014). Subjects find themselves in a state of ongoing suspension as their individual experience of uncertainty can no longer align with the social expectation (Petriglieri, 2007) of an occupational ideal (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014). In these discussions, the terms ‘permanent liminality’ and ‘perpetual in-betweenness’ (e.g. Garsten, 1999) describe how, in many contemporary work settings, this situation is no longer temporary or transitional. There is a ‘growing number of professionals who accept liminality as an ever present condition [...] They move in and out and consider it a stable state’ (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003, p. 286). Such liminality constitutes a condition that requires constant negotiations with a lasting experience of ambiguity, in-betweenness, placelessness (Ybema et al., 2011), a condition that has in fact become an (undesirable) status quo (Bamber et al., 2017; Spyridakēs, 2013).

Recent contributions in human geography and cultural studies show that experiencing uncertainty goes beyond the discursive and narrative expressions of a struggling individual. Considered to be affectively organised (Anderson, 2016), these contributions claim that the experience of uncertainty is mediated by and dependent on a complex network of ‘participants’ social ties’ (Worth, 2016, p. 611), and that it is lived through the routines, habits and internalisations that shape everyday life (Gilmore, Wagstaff, & Smith, 2018; Jokinen, 2016; Vij, 2013). To expand existing research on work-related uncertainty in organisation studies, we

continue along those lines by drawing out the entanglement between personal aspirations and broader societal conventions to further unfold the complex and ambiguous experience of feeling stuck.

To address this, we draw on Berlant's (2011) notion of the impasse. While the term suggests immobility and impassivity, Berlant shows that being stuck at the impasse is neither a static nor a dispassionate position. It rather implies constant movement and liveliness that take place in a pervasive state of disorientation. At same time, Berlant conceptualises the impasse as a predicament of feeling stuck that is maintained and nurtured by optimistic attachments – both individual and collective – to a fantasy of the good life, even as that promise cannot be realised. In order to further understand the role of affect in work-related uncertainty, we suggest bringing together affect theory with the reading of Fante's novel to draw out what is collective, general and contemporary about the stickiness that uncertain work arrangements seem to bring about.

Attending to affect with fiction

Affect theory has fanned out in various, partly overlapping approaches (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Generally, we situate our contribution in a field that is rooted in a Spinozian notion of affect as intertwined with bodies' capacity to affect and be affected (e.g. Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). In organisation studies, this notion is linked with reintroducing the bodily and sensory capacities that exist beyond, before or in addition to discursive practices of meaning-making. It suggests that when 'sensory awareness and atmosphere enter the scene' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p. 52), they open up new views on the embodied but often unarticulated forces at play in processes of organizing. They point to the relationship between different ways of sensing and making sense in organizations (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019; Pors, Otto & Olaison, 2019; Fotaki, & Vachhani, 2017; Johnsen, Berg Johansen, & Toyoki, 2018; Gherardi, 2017; Beyes & Steyaert, 2012).

While engaging with affect has been applauded as breaking with the deterministic qualities of language, discourse and meaning-making processes in post-structuralism, deconstruction and discourse studies, critics point out that the overemphasis on pre-discursive intensities that bodies can sense below the threshold of consciousness depreciates emotions as culturally-bound expressions of affect and creates an artificial divide between discursive and non-discursive forms of intelligibility (Cromby & Willis, 2016; Wetherell, 2013).

Responding to these criticisms, Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem (2017) emphasize the relational ontology, which underpins Spinozian readings of affect that makes any separation between culturally constructed emotions and the materiality of the (human) body hard to sustain. This extends the notion of the body in a way that Ashcraft has done, quoting Stewart (2007), who argues that intensities are formed not only amongst 'human bodies, [but also]

discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water.’ (Ashcraft 2017, p. 50). Through atmospheres and bodily encounters, affect moves between bodies and therefore highlights the interdependence between bodies (Pors, 2019, p. 29). Thus, when we set out to study affect ‘out there’, the distinctions between affect and discourse, or affect and emotion are neither viable nor practical. In such a relational view, affects and affective structures are circuits of thinking, feeling and sensing between human and non-human bodies (Pors, 2019, p. 39; Pullen, 2017). It sees life as becoming, in which multiple bodies are constantly related, connected and coproduced in assemblages (also Blackman & Venn, 2010). Similar to Pullen et al. (2017) and Ashcraft (2017), who point to the oppressive structures in the form of hegemonic subjectivities and transpersonal agentic figures, we propose with Berlant (2011) to engage with affect in relation to clusters of promises that organise conventions about what can be hoped for in order to explore how these affectively mediated relations stay and stick.

‘Clusters of promises’ around conventions of expectations, such as the American Dream in the Fante novel, or the promise of stable employment in contemporary analysis of work uncertainty generally, ‘serve as moorings [...] for intensities within streaming experience’ (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2015, p. 179). Such attachments and ‘the desire to sustain them’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 13) are what bind bodies together; they are that to which bodies return, and that which bodies inhabit. They have structural effects in that they stabilise attachments to the institutional scaffolding of our social and political infrastructure by making desirable particular ways of living. At the same time, these ‘affective investments are anchored for the subject in institutions and modes of injustice [so that they] organise the stakes of our activity and shape what possibilities we consider to be meaningful in play’ (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2015, p. 182). Yet Berlant immediately undermines any notion of determinism in that she conceptualises as highly precarious and unstable the relationship between what is sensed and experienced everyday and what can be hoped for and expected. She emphasizes that gaps and glitches in reproducing conventions are essential to our everyday practices and plots. While assuming that our present is ‘a scene of bargaining with normalcy in the face of conditions that can barely support [...] this fantasy’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 167), she directs attention to the remarkable performances of managing this instability in ways that maintain some sense of meaningful relations.

Hence we consider affect not only with regard to its visceral and non-intentional dimensions (e.g. Massumi, 1995) but also with regard to how it relates to fantasies and promises clustering around normative forms of living. In other words, being interested in ‘the dialectic of fictional and lived forms in which each animates and transduces the expectations and energy of the other’ (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2015, p. 180), we map out the conditions under which attachments to these conventions are maintained and nurtured, explore the gaps on the way of reproducing conventions and the way people organise the multitude of everyday sensations in relation to it. Eventually, we seek out what kinds of movements remain possible if the present is

constantly in crisis. Plots of realist novels such as *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* engage with this everyday struggle to organise and manage the gap between promised conventions of living and lived experience. We thus propose such novels as ideal sites for exploring the constant bargaining that the precariousness of uncertain work lives necessitates.

The use of fiction in organisation studies is an established practice in its own right (e.g. Case & Gaggiotti, 2016; Land & Śliwa, 2009; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999) that assumes that 'literary fiction can reveal important truths about organisational life without recourse to the representation of factual events' (Munro & Huber, 2012, p. 524). It thus displays numerous overlaps with the methodological and political concerns at the heart of affect-theoretical contributions to organisation studies.

For instance, Case (1999) states that novel offer the opportunity to develop a sensibility for emotions, because in the literary arts the 'exploration of emotional sensibility lies at the very heart of apprehending human motive and purpose' (Case, 1999, p. 664). Recent contributions inspired by affect theory follow Case's call to deal with the 'non-rational hinterland [...] of organizations' (p. 666) and thus extend it in their attempts to touch the ungraspable and unaccounted dimensions of organisational life (e.g. Otto, Pors & Johnsen, 2018; Steyaert, 2015; Holt & Zundel, 2014). De Cock and Land (2006) also remind us that literature has the potential to 'give us other worlds and becomings and does so not by being a copy of the actual world but by extending the virtual tendencies of the given world' (p. 526). Put differently, the novel's 'literary imagination' addresses processes involving affect, ambivalence and multiplicity (Ratner et al., 2014, p. 78) and raises awareness of the potentialities of a present state.

Contributions that highlight overlaps with affect theory suggest displacing the question of what it means with the question how it affects. For example, Steyaert (2015) experiments with the form of the textual triptych to evoke an affective understanding of the role of queerness in organisation studies. Rippin (2009) gives an account of her experience as a woman reading Bukowski's *Post Office* to 'draw our attention to the multi-layered interweavings of novel, author, organization, analyst' (Land & Śliwa, 2009, p. 255). These contributions can be considered as 'little laboratories' (Duschinsky & Wilson, 2014, p. 184) of more-than-representational approaches (Lorimer, 2005) that experiment with new forms of reading/writing in order to (re-)create affective resonances, intensities, and all that is usually taken as fleeting, mundane or inarticulate (Lohmann & Steyaert, 2006, p. 90). Complementing these approaches, we stress that reading, too – especially in the case of novels – is performative (Strauß, forthcoming) in that the reader participates in co-creating reality rather than merely deriving it from the text (Czarniawska, 2009). We explore how the relationship between novel, reader and writer can teach us about the interplay between affects, conventions, and the social promises made and recreated by particular patterns of living, sensing and feeling (Berlant, 2011, p.54; see also, Duschinsky & Wilson, 2015).

In his novel, Fante produces ‘affective landscapes’ (Steyaert, 2015, p. 171). They unfold in a complex structure of ‘self-contained chapters, linked but not successive in causality’ (Kordich, n.d., p. 23). In order to (re)think affective investments related to feeling stuck in uncertain work arrangements, we have chosen scenes that on the one hand are related to the presence of particular structural effects revolving around optimistic attachments to the American Dream, and on the other to ways individuals respond to the divergence between expectations of stability and actual uncertainty. Shifting with the novel, we thus aim to track intensities, resonances, recurring social objects and scenes of desire in order to highlight the novel’s affective investments that bind bodies together and that bodies inhabit. While focussing on those moments that produce stickiness in the ongoing flows of affects when work and its adjunct promises become ever more subject to uncertainties, we also identify moments that create openings. Reading the novel thus becomes a way of exploring how those attachments that shape the impasse are ‘inhabited and [become] liveable [...] in multiple ways in the materiality of everyday life’ (Jokinen, 2016, p. 88).

Wait Until Spring, Bandini: Organising the crisis ordinary

Wait Until Spring, Bandini is a portrait of the American Dream unrealised. The Bandinis – Maria, Svevo and their three sons – are a family of Italian origin living in Colorado during the Great Depression. Svevo’s work as a bricklayer is the only source of income for the family, but his work is seasonal since mortar freezes during Colorado’s harsh winters. This means that every winter their economic situation becomes especially precarious. Yet instead of moving to a state like California with a temperate climate they stay and grapple with the situation. The story thus deals with what Berlant (2011) calls the ‘crisis ordinary’: a condition that not only organises the present but also demands strategies of organising that constantly exceed the taken-for-granted in that those strategies never settle in an institutionalised set of practices but remain tentative and precarious. In the following, we examine the different ways Svevo and Maria organise their everyday sensations, how they are swayed by collective fantasies of a good life in which many are affectively invested, and what other modes of imagining life they fall back on to manage the gap between hopes, conventions and everyday experiences and sensations.

Believing in a life beyond

Without a steady flow of income, Maria finds it hard to provide her family with food, clothes and medical care. ‘No Bandini. No money. No food’ (p. 70). Haunted by the bills that have piled up at the grocery store, she regularly has to confront the grocer, Mr Craik, who ‘pitied her with that cold pity small businessmen show to the poor as a class, and with that frigid self-defensive apathy toward individual members of it’ (p. 71).

In the grocery store, her inability to take part in practices of economic exchange makes her invisible in the economic structure expressed by the businessman, who simply ignores her and her attempts to start a conversation in which she can express her demands. Humiliation arises by leaving her in a prolonged situation of waiting for a chance to make herself heard as a consumer.

In the earlier years she used to greet him. But now she felt that perhaps he would not relish such familiarity, and she stood quietly in her corner, waiting until he was ready to wait on her. Seeing who it was, he paid no attention, and she tried to be an interested and smiling spectator as he swung his cleaver. [...] He was hacking a bone inside a red and juicy rump. She said: "It looks good, doesn't it?" [...] She lifted her eyes to the clock: ten minutes to six. Poor Mr. Craik! He looked tired. [...] Mr. Craik looked at her, exhaled, and went on sweeping. She said, "It is cold weather we're having." But he coughed, and she supposed he hadn't heard [...] The big clock ticked away. Now it was six o'clock [...] Was it possible that he was not aware of her presence in the store? Surely he had seen her come in and stand there! [...] The big clock ticked. It was ten minutes after six [...] Now she no longer faced him. Shamed, exhausted, her feet had tired, and with hands clasped in her lap she sat on an empty box and stared at the frosted front windows. Mr. Craik [...] went to the back room again, returning with his coat. As he straightened his collar, he spoke to her for the first time. "Come on, Mrs. Bandini. My God, I can't hang around here all night long." At the sound of his voice she lost her balance. She smiled to conceal her embarrassment, but her face was purplish and her eyes lowered [...] "Oh!" she said. "I was—waiting for you!" "What'll it be, Mrs. Bandini—shoulder steak?" [...] Her heart beat so fast she could think of nothing at all to say now [...] "Hurry up, Mrs. Bandini. My God, you been here about a half hour now, and you ain't made up your mind yet. [...] Do you want shoulder steak?" [...]

She gathered her packages. [...] Such a relief to step into the street! How tired she was. Her body ached. Yet she smiled [...] hugging her packages lovingly, as though they were life itself (pp. 74-79).

Maria is literally stuck in the situation, as expressed by the clock ticking away while she is waiting for the grocer to acknowledge her presence. She is unable to execute economic transactions, and her body as it enters the store becomes ghostly; it seems to be neither seen nor heard by the grocer. Yet, although Fante introduces the historicity of the situation by juxtaposing the Bandinis' dwindling economic viability with the negative emotional predisposition small businessmen use to distance themselves from the poor, the affectivity of the situation is not necessarily predetermined. Underneath the general sense of humiliation flows the current of a complex interplay among bodies, voices and sensations that produce ongoing affective variations. On the one hand, it is the sensation of drift as time goes by. Entering the scene, Maria is not immediately subject to humiliation. Knowing her inability to participate in economic exchange, she tries to grapple with this by posing as an interested and smiling spectator, while unavailingly using her voice to push herself out of her passive role. It is the prolonged state of

being ignored, heightened by the ticking clock, that slowly elicits the sensation of shame and primes her to be thrown off balance when addressed by the grocer.

On the other hand, within this drift, there are several undercurrents of minor sensations, such as being interested in or empathic with Mr Craik that allow her to endure the situation as they figure small opportunities to forage a different outcome. Even in profound humiliation, Maria is not fully devastated. She endures the situation by reaching beyond it, finding pride in her husband to which she can cling: 'Maria always felt that Mr. Craik was afraid of her husband; [i]t was a belief that secretly made her very proud' (p. 77). And although the situation makes Maria in some sense invisible, Mr Craik cannot fully erase her presence in the store. The stubbornness of her bodily presence, however ghostly, haunts the grocer, who despite his reluctance eventually serves her. She succeeds in getting yet another bag of groceries without paying; she manages this even though or precisely because her actions ignore or escape the conventional setting of economic exchange. Her ability to endure pushes the situation past a threshold beyond which the affectivity involved with economic exchange loses potency. Her body is acted upon but maintaining her (ghostly) presence, Maria receives the goods without paying; exiting the store, she comes back to life. These experiences of humiliation and endurance in a hostile atmosphere are set against the alluring promises of consumer culture. For Maria, magazines constitute a projective space holding the promise of the good American life. She loses herself 'in the fairyland of a woman's magazine, gazing with sighs at electric irons and vacuum cleaners' (p. 53). Her answer to these experiences of inadequacy, originating from her Italian descent, seems to be rather pragmatic. Although born American, she recognises that the Dream is a dream for others – American women, non-migrants. Maria, instead, is affectively invested in an alternative promise of the good life: '[s]he had no need in her heart for either book or magazine. She had her own way of escape, her own passage into contentment: her rosary' (p. 53). For Maria, praying the rosary constitutes a place for (re)creating dignity, resilience and hope:

She was away: she was free; she was no longer Maria, American or Italian, poor or rich, with or without electric washing machines and vacuum cleaners; here was the land of all-possessing. Hail Mary, Hail Mary, over and over, a thousand and a hundred thousand times [...] the escape of the mind, the death of memory, the slipping away of pain, the deep silent reverie of belief. Hail Mary and Hail Mary. It was for this that she lived (p. 53).

The meditative clicking of the rosary beads and mumbling of prayers, Maria's body silently moving in the rocking chair next to the fireplace, the only warm place in the house, which also gathers her three sons in the evening – such moments create a temporary sensual atmosphere for the Bandinis. It provides quotidian pleasure and relaxation that counter the demands of feeling stuck in the crisis ordinary: getting the family through the day, the week, the

winter. In those brief episodes of complete withdrawal from the persistent task of treading water (Berlant, 2011, p.168), Maria experiences bodily well-being that is completely disassociated from the necessities of survival. Instead of responding with waiting, refusal or ignorance, as she has at the grocery store, this response is much more radical. It involves detachment from family duties and thus introduces a horizon that exceeds the present and the future of a life associated with this Maria Bandini. The alternative affective investments in a narrative of a life beyond transgresses an environment shaped by the conventions of the American Dream. While Maria's life constantly demands that she forcefully put herself together, for instance when she has 'to coax herself to a pitch of aspired audacity to face [Mr. Craik] each day' (p. 71), the rosary meditations allow her to introduce temporary 'vacations from the will itself' (Berlant, 2011, p. 116).

Counting on a streak of luck

Born in Italy, Svevo is highly invested in the American Dream, a masculine dream about becoming American by working his way up. Yet, with work opportunities highly uncertain in winter, Svevo is stuck. Fante expresses Svevo's experience of feeling stuck by a poetic description of a snowy landscape whose beautiful whiteness seems to weigh hard on Svevo's shoulders. He misses the golden colours of the sunnier seasons that mean work. The 'beautiful white snow [...] [was] like the beautiful white wife of Svevo Bandini, so white, so fertile, lying in a white bed' (p. 2) who 'had a rosary so white you could drop it in the snow and lose it forever' (p. 3). While Maria's alternative notion of a good life is rooted in Catholicism and thus part of a Mediterranean tradition that Svevo desperately wants to leave behind, her fertility means 'an accumulation of mouths to feed' (p. 25) that become increasingly expensive as they grow older. Svevo and Maria are affectively bound to each other not only through love but also in their distance from Americanism. Yet while for Maria this distance enables her alternative notion of a good life, her affective investment in Italian values of faith and family seem to undermine him and his desire to become American.

A wife like a ghost, always content in her little half of the bed [...] [W]as it any wonder that he couldn't pay for this house, this madhouse occupied by a wife who was a religious fanatic? A man needed a wife to goad him on, inspire him, and make him work hard. But Maria? Ah, povera America! (p. 10)

In contrast to Maria who inhabits the world through persistency, Fante establishes Svevo's inclination to respond to the world through motion: 'He came along, kicking the deep snow' (p. 1). Motion, here, comes in the double sense of moving and activity. Unlike Maria, Svevo's place of action is not the house, but a periodically disappearing workplace outside the house. Svevo is a builder. His work involves the production of a material reality that is meant to last, but snow disables his world-building abilities. Stuck in the 'white prison of winter' (p. 13),

his ability to act becomes futile like kicking snow: moving does not get him anywhere. In winter, Svevo becomes a drifter, disconnected from the physical world that now is a constant reminder of his insufficiency.

The house was not paid for. It was his enemy, that house. It had a voice, and it was always talking to him, parrot-like, forever chattering the same thing. Whenever his feet made the porch floor creak, the house said insolently: you do not own me, Svevo Bandini, and I will never belong to you. [...] For fifteen years that house had heckled him and exasperated him with its idiotic independence (p. 4).

The material world and Svevo's body no longer form an enabling relationship. Fante describes Svevo's perception of the house coming to life just to mock him, giving us a sense of how the impasse works on his body on a daily basis. Svevo, in contrast to Maria, responds to the downward spiral by envisioning the possibility of radical change by keeping himself invested in a belief in luck. Unable to 'play the system', Svevo turns to gambling as a way of not yielding to despair. Keeping tirelessly in motion thus is more than the restlessness of a trapped body. Moving to different places and meeting new people can also create luck, for instance by making it possible to encounter another body that is responsive in an enabling way. This streak of luck eventually comes in form of a wealthy American widow who hires him to repair her fireplace.

A beautiful house, Indian rugs over the floor, large beams across the ceiling, the woodwork done in yellow lacquer. [...] Would Maria understand that surge of humility as he crossed the handsome room, the embarrassment as he staggered when his worn shoes, wet with snow, failed to grip the shining yellow floor? Could he tell Maria that the attractive woman felt a sudden pity for him? It was true: even though his back was turned, he felt the Widow's quick embarrassment for him, for his awkward strangeness. [...] [H]e told her the work would amount to fifteen dollars, including the price of materials. She did not object. Then it came to him as a sickening afterthought that the reason for her liberality was the condition of his shoes: she had seen the worn soles as he knelt to examine the fireplace. Her way of looking at him, up and down, that pitying smile, possessed an understanding that had sent the winter through his flesh (pp. 135–7).

The scene is situated in an atmosphere full of awkwardness, tension and possibility, an atmosphere created by the contrast of materialities: handsome, light and shiny on the one hand, worn and wet with snow on the other. It is this juxtaposition that sets up Svevo's body for sensing its place in the hierarchy and for being humiliated in a very different way than Maria is. It is not frigid pity like Mr Craik's but rather the compassion of the Widow's pity that makes him freeze. Words fail him. This awkwardness temporarily suspends when she expresses her appreciation for his work.

She did not even glance at the work he had done. 'You're a splendid worker Mr. Bandini. Splendid. I'm very pleased. [...] [T]hose words almost pinched a tear

from his eyes. 'I do my best, Mrs. Hildegarde. I do the best I can.' But she showed no desire to pay him. [...] At last she broke the silence: she had other work for him (pp. 141–2).

As in the scene in the grocery store, it is silence that gradually sets up the body for the voice to make a decisive push that defines the situation. Despite her deferral of payment, which reflects the stark power imbalance between the two, her voice acknowledges his professional identity and elicits his sense of being seen and respected, a feeling he craves.

[...] tomorrow there was work. And after that, there would always be work. The Widow Hildegarde liked him; she respected his ability. With her money and his ability there would always be work enough to laugh at the winter (p. 143).

The proximity to the Widow holds the promise of ending the precarious everyday negotiation of his social belonging, a promise that the humiliation and improvisation of everyday life will turn into the normalcy of an American life. While Svevo clearly does not want the life of the Widow Hildegarde – he prefers his working class milieu – her proximity symbolises an infrastructure of sociality that offers the potential for flourishing.

As the exceptional status of this lucky coincidence keeps the situation open and free from subjugation to a stable set of rules, moralities or guidelines, it almost bursts with optimistic potential and thereby nurtures his attachment to the American Dream. Yet the Widow undermines his hopes by gradually shifting their relationship from a professional to an intimate one. It becomes clear that her proximity is not – as hoped – a way out of the impasse that has trapped the family. It will not lead to a sustainable opportunity of steady work.

Instead of walking out of the shifted situation he stays attached, a temporary reversal of power keeps him invested. In these intimate moments, Svevo finds a twisted realisation of his affective investments in the cluster of promises, such as success, upward mobility, etc., held by the American Dream.

She would gasp and weep and then he would leave in the twilight, triumph giving zest to his legs. [...] The Widow had money – yes. But back there she lay, crushed, and Bandini was a better man than she, by God. (p.158)

Albeit in a chauvinistic way, his ability to temporarily turn around power structures rooted in economic inequality momentarily elevates him and offers to temporarily restore a feeling of potency and power.

In contrast to Maria, for whom the affective investment in an alternative notion of the good life is continuously available and functional in maintaining the family's survival, Svevo's way of stretching the convention of the breadwinner in not only temporary but also comes at the price of losing his family because it entails an act of adultery.

Discussion

The Bandinis find themselves in ongoing limbo. The characters struggle to make a life; they appear adrift in a state of disorientation amid constant change, disorganisation and uncertainty. Fante captures this struggle in a sequence of activities that reconstitute and rely on shifting imaginaries and conventions, relations and feelings, atmospheres and environmental states. The Bandinis' economic vulnerability is undeniable, but it does not explain why they remain in this undesirable situation instead of doing something else – for instance moving to California with its year-round bricklaying season. The novel shows how Maria's and Svevo's sensing and feeling, such as humiliation (blushing), sudden anger (outbursts) or ongoing meditations (withdrawal) are affective and corporal attachments to a perforated fantasy of the good life, captured in the American Dream, which keeps them stuck. Such deeply personal and embodied reactions and activities cannot be conceived outside the socio-discursive contexts and histories in which they are embedded. They are intrinsically linked with the social norms, conventions and expectations, that promise to provide a roadmap for acting. However, the 'cluster of promises' can never be fully realised (Berlant, 2011, p.24), it contains glitches, gaps and impossibilities that, at the level of sensing and feeling, create a dialectic tension between what is expected and what can actually be achieved (ibid, p. 98). This tension animates and organises various relational affects such as a humiliation, frustration, surprise, feeling of being 'out of place', detachment and hope that always include a potential for change.

In the last part of this paper, we want to extend our reading of Fante through an affect-theoretical lens to ongoing discussions in organisation studies that concern the notion of feeling permanently stuck in uncertain work arrangements (e.g. Bamber et al., 2017; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Garsten, 1999) to address what makes the feeling of uncertainty so sticky and to point towards an affective politics that could work towards unhinging this state.

Powerful attachments, feeling stuck and the stickiness of affect

The novel allows us to grasp how the characters' strong investment in (and confrontations with) the promise of the American Dream cuts across all elements of the complex entanglements and interplay of embodied affects that constitute the life of the Bandinis. This social object (Vij, 2013), a fantasy of the good life, suggests that earning enough money to own a comfortable house, engaging in American consumerism, and dissolving the migrant status of the family are achievable, if only one works hard enough, and, in Fante's titular conceit, waits for spring to arrive. The 'cruel optimism' of the novel's title suggests, on the one hand, that work will come in spring, i.e. that change is near (Berlant, 2011). On a more metaphorical level, however, it reveals the futility of this hope: spring will come and so will winter; better times will never become the

status quo. The Dream is constantly undermined and compromised. Life remains stuck in a permanent struggle to get by and to make sense of an incoherent world in which stability lies always beyond the characters' reach. The situation 'lingers on', floating between desperation and hope.

The affective experience of feeling stuck in such an extended present resonates strongly with findings from diverse contemporary studies on uncertain work lives. For example, Fraher and Gabriel's (2014) study on airline pilots who are permanently grounded because of excessive industry restructuring shows the individuals' strong investment in an 'occupational fantasy' as a cluster of promises: the childhood dream of flying combined with a secure job imbued with status. Thus, similar to the Bandinis, the pilots are highly invested in particular plots of the good life, but attaining that life is rather unlikely. The life experienced or sensed on an everyday basis thus fails to live up to expectations. While the authors show that holding on to these narratives is functional for enduring the hardship of the predicament, they also point out that the narrative becomes a severe obstacle 'that hinders flexibility and inhibits adaptation to changing circumstances' (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014, p. 928). Such an identity-based approach may implicitly suggest that the ability to move on is based on the subject's agency in constructing his/her own occupational narrative. In the end, it comes down to individual predisposition and circumstance whether one is able to detach from this 'self-constructed cage' (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014, p. 928) and 'to end it' (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003, p. 286). Reading *Bandini* with Berlant, however, extends such research in that it not only stresses the role of affective investment in powerful 'occupational fantasies' that make them so sticky. It also points to an awareness that an affective de-investment that admits the unattainability of the promises might be too high a price to pay, because sometimes - as in the case of Svevo - the fantasy is the only thing left to hold on to. Moving on is not only a matter of changing the occupational narrative. The reading of Fante's realist novel exposes that the grounded airline pilots, just as the characters' bodies are parts of multilayered assemblages that are deeply personal and embodied experiences but they are at the same time affectively entangled with broader societal conventions and fantasies that keep them in place. In this setting, individual agency is dispersed, relational and situated (cf. Worth, 2016, p.602) and only actualised in brief moments.

Managing the gaps between experience and expectations

Beyond an affective understanding of the powerful attachments to social fantasies, we argue that the novel also alerts us to arduous and exhausting activities required for maintaining a sense of normality in the crisis ordinary. While these activities are overwhelming, they can also create islands of relief and potentials for alternative affective encounters and imaginaries. With the novel, the reader can grasp how the feeling of being permanently stuck is a highly dynamic state

that takes on different shapes for different bodies and different intensities in the way it organises daily life: it meanders between disabling and enabling senses and feelings.

Consider Maria at the grocery store. In this scene, the novel vividly unfolds the many dynamic layers and movements contained in the not so static, not so passive activity of waiting for a chance to make herself visible as a consumer. Her insistence on lingering in the store pushes the situation past a threshold beyond which new openings and ways forward can emerge. Juxtaposing this affective experience with the findings of Bamber et al.'s (2017) study on the professional limbo of teaching-only staff in higher education exposes crucial similarities. These university lecturers have realised that the promise of becoming a 'real' academic—one with research responsibilities and tenure—is hollow, and yet their hopeful activities continue (see also Grey & Costas, 2014). Aware of the futility and durability of the situation, the lecturers re-invent and create practices beyond the given job description that are meant to induce forms of visibility, recognition, meaning and survival. Similarly, Maria and Svevo create small islands of normality, of relief from the overwhelming demands that constitute their daily struggle: Maria's pride in her intimidating husband, her meditative practices that take her to a life beyond; Svevo's hope for luck, his intimate encounter with the Widow. Such activities constitute momentary detachments and make treading water a less-bad experience (Berlant, 2011, p. 100).

Yet, reading Fante's *Bandini* forces us to realise that the prolonged crisis that marks the sense of feeling permanently stuck is – despite and perhaps because of its confusions and frustrations – not a standstill. Being stuck is hard work. Something is always happening, the various modes of patience and persistence that, for instance, Maria has developed, cannot countervail the downward drift that the accumulation of debt entails. Constant adjustments and (re-)organisations are creating new barriers but also much hoped for senses of opportunity, as in case of Svevo. Fante shows how minor formations of change and detachment are possible, even if not (immediately) perceptible. A similar point is also made by Jokinen's (2016) study on the precarious life of unemployed women. They create 'small agencies' in terms of breaking or reinventing habits, not taking things too seriously and taking pride in staying afloat while by being ready to turn and move at any time. These are their ways to cope with and resist the ways in which capitalism 'disorganises' their everyday lives (Jokinen, 2016, p. 90).

Fante's novel can also dissuade us from romanticising those small creative acts that make suffering from work uncertainty more bearable. The novel exposes the abiding vulnerabilities and costs that such alternative activities imply. For example, while Svevo's intimate encounter at the Widow's house is 'a relief, a reprieve' from everyday suffering, infused as it is with bodily pleasures and hope, it is 'not a repair' (Berlant, 2011, p. 117). Even more ambiguously, those moments of relief can deepen the continuous optimistic investment into fantasies that are detrimental to the subject's wellbeing. In Svevo's case, the intimate encounter is full of opportunities (for work, money, pleasure), but it equally constitutes a fatal threat to the

family. Svevo's encounter exposes the fragility of his enabling attachment to the family collective, and almost destroys his marriage along with the stability and desired normality it represents.

Conclusion - The novel as a sensuous site

By reading *Bandini* and Berlant together with studies on contemporary experiences of uncertain work arrangements, our aim has been to identify common threads with regard to the experience of those arrangements, the general effort of everyday survival, and the fantasies and conventions that sustain this effort. This move allowed us to avoid a categorisation that differentiates between employment and unemployment, between standard and nonstandard work (Ashford et al., 2007), between high-skilled and low-skilled labour (Atkinson, 2010; Cooper, 2008) and directs attention towards collective affective mediations which shape the experience of everyday life in uncertain work arrangements. The cross-reading has shown that the powerful attachment to fraying promises such as the American Dream or stable employment persists across professions, milieus and localities – and fictional histories. It shows that the individually experienced feeling of being indefinitely stuck in uncertain work arrangements can also be read as collective, general, contemporary (Butler, 2015; Garsten, 1999) in that it is linked to affective investments in collective narratives of a good life.

'Lives are not novels or maybe they are as no critic has ever accounted for all the acts and details in a novel either,' Berlant (2011, p. 99) writes. Novels mediate the present through their aesthetics, and in their affective richness they do not fundamentally differ from life. Fante produces an 'affective landscapes', in which perspectives, times, dreams, places, names, feelings, thoughts and dialogue are assembled into splitting and shifting spotlights on different bodies, matters, temporalities and places. This creates a multiplication: each character becomes several in contact with others – human and nonhuman – and it undermines any essentialist and contained understanding of such individual beings. In contact with the reader, the novel produces proximity but not intimacy, empathy but not identification. Instead of perceiving the protagonists as independent and fixed subjects, Fante's writing allows the reader to grasp the protagonists' activities as shifting effects of ongoing relational enactments. At the same time, these shifting enactments also produce sediments slow enough for the reader to simultaneously perceive them as actors responding to the dialectics of fantasies, feelings and promises. Fante writes realist fiction rooted in his own experiences as the son of poor Italian immigrants. And yet it is not a recording of his contemporary reality but rather the aesthetic outcome of a creative processing of this reality that has turned the historical status of that world into a new site of experience. As such, it is aesthetics as sensual site where writer and reader meet in their sensuousness (Linstead, 2018). Such realist fiction allows us to grasp the interplay among affects, conventions and the promises made by particular patterns of living in which we are

invested as a collective. By highlighting glitches and gaps in the reproduction of convention, realist novels expose the dialectic between fictional and lived forms, a dialectic that stabilises but also undermines the affective investments with which promises and conventions hold one another afloat.

Czarniawska (2009, p. 359) notes that particular readings always arise 'in a triangle: the text, the reader, and the situation of the reading.' As researcher-readers, we bring our own filters and situations to the substance of Fante's novel. We read it informed by our engagement with the academic texts of organisation studies, but also necessarily intertwined with the situation we find ourselves in. Reading and writing with the novel thus invokes experiences, memories, and even fantasies that are not only individual or group based. Rather, reading and writing with the novel evokes affective resonances between fictitious and non-fictitious bodies from differently constituted worlds (McLean, 2017, Pors, 2019). It breaks the distinction between the idea of a confined individual and its environment as it creates an affective assemblage between novel+reader+writer+text+ that can be considered as a 'zone of indiscernability where the actuality of the living individual becomes indistinguishable from an impersonal virtuality' (McLean, 2017, p. 42).

A politics of affect, thus, would be involved with 'people feeling out the conditions' (p.17) of a particular present or scene they find themselves in not with regard to the negative affectivity of threats only (Ashcraft, 2017; Pullen et al. 2017) but also with regard to affective investments in fantasies of a good life and cluster of promises that stabilise conventions. As we have shown with the reading of Bandini, affective investments in collective fantasies, such as the American Dream, can be equally cruel if the conditions for fulfilling these promises are fraying: they keep individuals invested in a situation that prevents their flourishing. Hence, it is sentimental plots - narratives of the good life that are affectively charged - that are potentially part of a politics that operates below the marked status of the political (Berlant, 2008, p.3). The novel has the capacity to invoke human imagining beyond those fantasies by destabilizing their affective attachments and possibly creating different encounters and open-ended performative collective experiences. Therefore, at least, tentatively the newly emerging novel+reader+writer+text+ assemblage may contribute to the possibility of 'new forms of mutuality and relatedness' (McLean, 2011) across generations, across time and place.

In contrast to contributions that see affect's critical potential in the excess of affect as transpersonal force before 'thought kicks in' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p.52), we suggest exploring the dynamics between commonly available sentimental plots, conventions and their affective mediation that have an impact on what people expect in, how they sense out a situation of uncertainty and what they do to manage possible gaps between expectation and experience. Realist novels construct their plots around these gaps and make them experientially inhabitable. Sharing how affective investments in different narratives of a good life lead Maria and Svevo to

diverging ways of making sense of and responding to their situation, the novel might also extend the palette of sentimental plots available to the reader. Multiplying the experience of how life can also feel like can thus contribute to produce fantasies of the good life that might be more achievable, pragmatic, inclusive and *desirable* than the fantasy of stable employment or the American Dream. We hope that reading and writing with novels creates affective resonances that carry us as researchers into new and thought-provoking constellations that expand our imagination beyond the usual canon.

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