CBS COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

Reopening the Field
Reading/Writing Robert Cooper Today

Spoelstra, Sverre; Parker, Martin; Lilley, Simon; Olaison, Lena

Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Ephemera: Theory & politics in organization

Publication date:
2023

License
CC BY-NC-ND

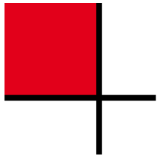
Citation for published version (APA):
Spoelstra, S., Parker, M., Lilley, S., & Olaison, L. (2023). Reopening the Field: Reading/Writing Robert Cooper Today. *Ephemera: Theory & politics in organization*, *23*(3), 1-20.
https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/reopening-field-readingwriting-robert-cooper-today

Link to publication in CBS Research Portal

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 10. Oct. 2024



ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2023
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 23(3)

Reopening the field: Reading/writing Robert Cooper today*

Sverre Spoelstra, Martin Parker, Simon Lilley and Lena Olaison

Introduction

Robert Cooper (1931-2013) is well-known in organization studies, especially among scholars with an interest in poststructuralism and process theory. He is especially recognized for his work on 'organization/disorganization' and, together with Gibson Burrell, for introducing postmodernism and poststructuralism to the study of organizations in the late 1980s (e.g. Cooper, 1986; Cooper, 1989; Cooper and Burrell, 1988). The broad impact he has had on organization theory is evidenced by *ephemera*'s early special issue 'Responding: To Cooper' (Böhm and Jones, 2001), as well as by two books edited by Robert Chia (1998a; 1998b), a collection of seminal papers (Burrell and Parker, 2016), and a recent special issue of *ephemera* on disorder and disorganization (Plotnikof et al., 2022). Cooper's work is interesting not only for its theoretically rich content but also for its dense and poetic style of writing, which often defies contemporary expectations of what a typical journal article ought to look like.

* We are grateful to Maxine Cooper, Robert's widow, for permission to publish these previous unpublished papers. We would also like to thank SCOS for their permission to re-publish 'Canetti's sting ', originally published in SCOS Notework in 1992 (volume9, issue 2/3, pages 45-53), as well as Bijan Philip Mehrabizadeh-Honarmand who has provided indispensable editorial assistance.

A considerable quantity of Cooper's work was never formally published, and much of his unpublished output seems to circulate primarily amongst a small number of aficionados who share their photocopies of seminar presentations or conference papers. In this special issue of *ephemera*, we bring together six papers by Cooper that were hitherto not widely available. In doing so, we hope to encourage a re-engagement with Cooper's thought, as well as reflection on what these papers might illuminate today. Much has happened since these pieces were written, in the world, in thought, and in the conditions of the modern university system. There is, no doubt, something antique about this work, something in the style and approach that may appear rather dated to many readers now. Nonetheless, our aim is to bring Cooper's concepts and style into dialogue with contemporary organization studies and to ask what we might learn about our present by thinking along with him.

For scholars who know Cooper's work, the papers collected in this issue will cover familiar terrain, albeit perhaps in unfamiliar ways (through the notion of kitsch, for example, or through a reading of Elias Canetti's views on the command). Indeed, all six of the papers that are collected here reflect his broad interest in the idea of information, and in some of these papers information is indeed the main focus of attention. Rather than offering a detailed reading of these papers in relation to Cooper's canon, we will instead use this editorial to locate Cooper's own interest in the notion of information within the broader historical and cultural context, which includes some less well-known details about Cooper's work and life before 1976. Of particular interest is Cooper's role in the avant-garde poetry scene in the 1950s, to which he contributed both as editor and as poet. We then turn to the question of how (and in what sense) an engagement with Cooper's work can inform our work as organization theorists today.

The five commentary papers in this issue offer a starting point for addressing the question of how we might relate to Cooper today. These papers were submitted in response to an open call through which we invited submissions that take their point of departure from one of Cooper's unpublished papers collected here. Taken collectively, the commentary papers show the continued relevance of Cooper's work for organization theory – but not in a preformed way. For readers today, relating to Cooper's text entails a struggle with his concepts, and at times a creative approach to putting them to work

in a different historical context. In addition, a late interview with Cooper is included in the special issue, conducted by Maria Fernanda Cavalcanti in 2011. Their conversation builds bridges between Cooper's early ideas and the reading of Cooper today in the commentary papers.

We end this editorial with some reflection on Cooper's writing style, in which we can trace the influences of his early engagements with poetry. For most academic papers, form and style are given in advance through journal guidelines, explicit rules and paradigmatic examples. The contents of the paper, the argument, then needs to be moulded into the desired form. What Cooper learned from avant-garde poetry, we suggest, was that form ought to reflect the content. The content finds its form in the text – and it can only find this form through an openness that lies at the heart of research, in organization studies and elsewhere. But how might we understand what it means to be 'open'?

The open field and its poetic roots

Before considering the historical background to Cooper's work, we want to begin with a few comments on his 1976 paper 'The open field' (Cooper, 1976). 'The open field' occupies a special place in Cooper's *oeuvre*, marking the beginning of the Cooper who is now known for his process-oriented ontology of organization and for introducing post-structuralism to organization studies. The paper was published in *Human Relations* in 1976 but a complete draft of the text was ready years before. As Cooper recalls in his interview with Cavalcanti (this issue), the piece was clearly not in tune with the norms of academic publishing at the time (arguably, it is even less so today) and the fact that it came to be published at all was primarily because Cooper knew the editor of the journal.

In an *ephemera* interview, Cooper characterizes the paper as 'the result of a personal revaluation of my academic knowledge of social science' (Cooper, 2001: 329). The past being referred to here is the work that Cooper undertook in the late 1960s and 1970s as part of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, predominantly on job design and motivation. Work from this period also includes a co-edited book with Bernard M. Bass (Bass, Cooper and Haas, 1970), who would become famous in the 1980s for introducing the

notion of transformational leadership to a business audience. This body of work belonged essentially to the paradigm of functionalism (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and looks rather conventional in comparison to his later publications.

The 'active reworking' of Cooper's earlier thought consists of a reconsideration of the givens that come with the traditional literature on organizations and their management in disciplines such as systems theory, decision-making, information theory, and cybernetics. The reworking involved opening up all these concepts for analysis. About 'information', we read:

> Information is two things: it is *difference* (in the cybernetic sense) and it is *what goes into form*, i.e., in-forms. Ergo: difference is the key to form. So to find out is to be in form, i.e., literally be inside it, be part of. To be open to process is to be open to a field of dynamic difference (a bit is static difference, not true process) which means to be engaged with the Field at all possible points and not lose any of its active content through laziness or an act of prior selection. It is to know oneself more fully 'in the world', not as separate from it. (Cooper, 1976: 1011-1012)

This passage is difficult to grasp because it is written in Cooper's typically abstract manner, but also because it does not fully disclose the nature of Cooper's 'revaluation'. We suggest that his revaluation is not only a direct re-thinking of the preformed notions that informed Cooper in his early academic works, but that it also consists of a confrontation between, and, ultimately, a reconciliation of, two traditions that were very familiar to Cooper. These were, 1) the assumptions about systems theory and management motivation that had informed Cooper's academic work up to this point, and 2) his own history in the field of poetry in the 1950s, as both an editor and a poet, which was – in 1976 as later – only known to a handful of people to whom Cooper was close. In a sense, his understanding of poetry is the key to understanding how he unlocked some of the rigidities of functionalist organization and management theory.

'The open field' does contain a reference to Cooper's past engagement in poetry. While this reference would probably pass most readers by unnoticed, it not only helps connect the piece to a different period in Cooper's life but can also assist us in understanding Cooper's own 'revaluation' of the relation

between concepts and form. The reference in question is to a short book by the poet Charles Olson (1910-1970) entitled *The special view of history*, first published (posthumously) in 1970, but based on two early essays: 'Projective verse', originally published in 1950, and the 1951 essay 'Human universe'. Olson was one of the central figures of the Black Mountain Poetry school, also serving as the rector of the influential Black Mountain College through its final years until its closure in 1956. Black Mountain College was a private liberal arts college in North Carolina that hosted many artists and scholars who would go on to become well known in the arts, including choreographer Merce Cunningham, painter Robert Rauschenberg and composer John Cage. The college also hosted many poets over the years. Alongside Charles Olson, the Black Mountain poets included Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn and Denise Levertov. Most of these poets have their own archives now, which is how we know that Cooper had an active correspondence with many of them, including Olson and Creeley.

The essays that found their way into *The special view of history*, 'Projective verse' especially, were extremely influential for American poetry, and provided an important source of inspiration for the Beat generation and generations of poets to come (Kwansky, 2004). 'Projective verse' is a highly abstract essay about form in poetry, and the main question, as it is in Cooper's 'The open field', is how to put things into form. Specifically, Olson wanted to steer poets away from the pre-formed ways of doing poetry, which he referred to as 'closed form' poetry – poetry composed according to traditional ideas around the constructs of meter, rhyme, and stanzas. Olson contrasted this traditional approach with what he called 'Open Field' poetry or 'projective verse'. His overarching idea was that art is not supposed to describe but rather to 'enact'. To this end, he proposed a set of principles for poets to abide by, most famously the idea (suggested by Robert Creeley) that 'form is never more than an extension of content' (Olson, 1950: 2) which is to say that the form of a poem is to follow from the contents of the poem, which in turn follows from the rhythm of the 'breath' of the poet. The poem, instead of being pre-formed by social conventions, projects the energy of the poet in its most direct way and thereby finds its own form by being actualized as verse.

Cooper was one of the first in Europe to read a copy of Olson's essay. In a letter dated July 29, 1952, Cooper asked Robert Creeley to send him a copy of this

book.[1] We don't know if it was in fact Creeley who sent the book to him, but we do know that Cooper must have read it shortly after, and that it had a great impact upon his ideas about poetry and, eventually, about social theory.

So not only is the title 'The open field' a reference to Open Field poetry, but Cooper's essay draws on a similar idea of projectability to that which we encounter in Olson. Cooper writes:

> the essence of projectability lies in (1) the power of men to project their unconscious forces into the external world, and (2) the power of external forms to draw out and give substance to the unconscious content. Projectability is, therefore, a quality which pervades the total field. (Cooper, 1976: 1005)

Compare this to Olson:

> the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speed up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. (Olson, 1950: 8)

One can see here not only a correspondence in the use of language (projectability; field), but also the idea that the person or artist can become part of something larger than themselves by projecting their creative capacities in such a way that they become connected to 'the field', an abstract term with connotations of openness, wholeness, possibility, and fieldwork.

There are other, less direct, links between Olson's book and Cooper's 'The open field'. Central in Olson's book is the romantic poet John Keat's notion of 'negative capability', which refers to the quality of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason', which we also encounter in Cooper's essay and elsewhere (Keats, cited in Cooper, 1976: 1009; Cooper, 1987: 400; Olson, 1970: 14). Olson and Cooper also share some of the same sources of inspiration, including Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, Freudian psychoanalysis,

---

1 The letter is accessible at the Robert Creeley Archive at Stanford University.

Jungian psychology, and the general attempt to overcome Euclidean metaphysics.[2]

Olson had a notable influence on Cooper, but even more than this personal connection, it is clear that Cooper's re-evaluation was greatly assisted by his familiarity with the 1950s world of avant-garde poetry, to which he contributed both as an editor and, with less success, as a poet. In the early 1950s, still living in Liverpool, Robert Cooper edited a 'little magazine' (as they are known) of poetry entitled *Artisan*. He also set up a press called Heron, which published, alongside *Artisan*, a number of collections of poetry, including work by Vincent Ferrini and Alan Brownjohn's debut. The second issue of *Artisan* (Spring 1953), 'Nine American Poets', was dedicated to the verse of Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, about whom, as Cooper writes in the (anonymous) opening note, 'a divergence from an English tradition must, to begin with, focus on local conditions of language and speech'. It continues with a reference to Charles Olson's 'cogent essay on *Projective verse*' (Cooper, 1953). Other issues featured work by some of the most talented and original poets of the time, including an issue on Canadian poetry (Artisan 6, Autumn 1954) with contributions from Irving Layton, Louis Dudek and Gael Turnbull, amongst others. While Cooper had some minor successes in getting his own poetry published, notably four poems in issue XX of *Origin*, edited by Cid Corman (see Golding, 1990), in the late 1950s Cooper found himself at a crossroads, wondering whether he should continue to pursue a career in poetry or turn to academia as an alternative. In a 1957 letter to Henry Rago, editor of *Poetry Magazine*, Cooper writes that he wants to know whether to continue with writing verse or to pursue an academic career.[3] The response from Rago was not encouraging with regards to the first option, which may have contributed to Cooper leaving the poetry scene to pursue an academic career instead.

---

2 It may also be worth noting that Olson has been credited for introducing the term 'postmodernism' into poetry (e.g. Perry Anderson's 1998 *The origins of postmodernity*) just as Cooper, in collaboration with Gibson Burrell, has been credited with its introduction to organization studies.

3 The letter is found at the archive of Modern Poetry at the University of Chicago Library.

His departure from the poetry scene appears to have been rather abrupt and Cooper rarely mentioned his early engagement with poetry to colleagues in organization studies. It almost seems as if Cooper actively created a radical break, or distinction, between two different periods in his life. Yet it also clear that some of the theoretical questions with which the (post-)modern poetry of the 1950s was struggling continued to inform Cooper's thought. Indeed, some signs of this enduring influence can be detected in some of Cooper's papers published in the present issue. One of these papers, 'Institutional aesthetics,' opens with four excerpts from poems by Wallace Stevens, while the French poet and theorist Alain Robbe-Grillet is cited in both 'Organizational kitsch' and 'Open and closed systems'. A broader engagement with art and art theory can also be found in the other papers published in this issue, perhaps most notably in Cooper's 1995 piece 'Technology and still life'.

With Cooper's early engagement with poetry in mind, 'The open field' becomes less abstract. Just as the Black Mountain poets tried to open up the poem to a field of action that overcomes the weight of old habits, so Cooper's essay calls for a similar turn to process and open-ness, with regards to both organization theory and our relation to organizations more generally. This is, for instance, expressed in the weight of images that hold us back in transformational processes:

> Theories of human action typically assume that the content of most action is determined by the images people have of their environments. Images precede actions and give them meaning. The image is an active organization of past experience through which history writes the future. As such, the image inhibits the possibility of creative transformation which may be required for personal renewal or to meet novel demands. (Cooper, 1976: 1001)

Seen from today's perspective, 'The open field' remains an important essay that has lost little of its force as a manifesto for a post-foundational organization studies. The question that it raises in relation to organization theory, regarding how we can relate to or go beyond pre-formed ways of understanding organizations and the study of organizations, has lost little of its relevance. For instance, today, we frequently hear the complaint that so much in the field is 'formulaic'. Indeed, the very complaint that management and organization theory needs some sort of radical reinvention, often expressed by the grand old men of the field, has now itself become formulaic

(Birkinshaw et al, 2014; Parker, 2023). We suggest that some kind of return to the spirit of the open field might help us find new openings (as we will expand on later).

At the same time, and perhaps unsurprisingly for a text written fifty years ago, there is also something rather old-fashioned in its veneration of the 'man' (sic) who heroically overcomes the images that hold us back. This heroism in 'The open field' is not obvious but it is hard to miss it when set in the context of Olson's 1950s essays and their influence on the arts in the decades to follow. Olson, as Creeley recalls, was very much occupied with trying to find some contemporary rendition of Carlylean Great Man thinking, and projective verse was an articulation of the idea that greatness (in the arts, as elsewhere) consists of breaking the 'habit of history as some discrete ordering apart from what energies or active forces were the case' (Creeley, cited in Olson, 1970: 6). This artist who radically breaks with history, albeit by opening up to a broader field of possibilities, Mossin (2005: 18) suggests, can be seen as a distinctly masculine figure: 'it's impossible to read "Projective Verse," a central essay from this period, without becoming aware of the enormous pressure exerted by tropes of manliness, of use and method as coded terms for appropriately performed masculine endeavor'.[4] This kind of condensation of masculinity and romanticism is captured in the title of *The special view of history*, and was also a dominant strand in the arts scene at the time.[5] 'The open field', though more carefully articulated than much of Olson's prose, was clearly informed by this heroic tradition.

Following this seminal 1976 paper, 'understanding the nature of information' (Cooper, 1986/2023: 43, this issue) seems to have been the main objective that Cooper set himself in his scholarly work, and he returned to the topic again

---

4 As Clark's (1991) biography of Olson shows, Olson himself had more than a smack of the 'Great Man' around him, especially in his years as rector of Black Mountain.

5 Cooper's correspondence from this period is no exception. In two letters to Olson (dated 12 December 1952 and 25 January 1953), he draws attention to the figure of Alfred the Great, the king of England who was famous for preserving and uniting the nation in the face of the Viking invasion. Cooper seeks to enthuse Olson about Alfred's greatness of character and particularly about his attention to matters beyond the merely local. The letters are available at The Charles Olson Research Collection, UConn Library, University of Connecticut.

and again, continually reworking his understanding of it. Even those parts of his post-1976 work that do not explicitly deal with the notion of information, such as some of his work on postmodernism in the 1980s, are engagements with the basic problem of how to understand form and unform in their mutual dependence. By 'information', Cooper does not mean what is usually understood by the term, namely facts or pieces of knowledge, imagined as bounded entities that are ready to be transferred, shared, traded, or kept as secrets. For Cooper, 'information' is to be understood literally, as that which finds expression in form, a process in-formation. From that vantage point, his work is concerned with questions such as how forms take shape through processes of division, how forms survive through affirmation, and what forms do to their formless outsides.

As one might expect from such a long engagement with a single objective, the problem of information itself changes form in Cooper's work. In 'The open field', the question is how 'one' (an artist in the tradition of Olson, or any person in Cooper) can move out of one's pre-formed self and open up the latent possibilities of the open field. But in later essays the expressive, acting 'man' fades into the background and makes way for a more generic non-humanist analysis of how forms are formed and unformed. Central in this analysis is his challenge to the very idea of the 'one'. In the first of Cooper's contributions to this issue, his 1982 piece 'Canetti's sting', he writes that,

> information or message is the division or distinction of a prior unity into one or other of two possible cases. (...) We constantly assert that '*one* exists', '*one* thinks', '*one* feels', and so on, and in this 'one' we observe the impersonal subject that lies at the origin of structure whether numerical or social. 'One' is never 'one' in the sense of unity or whole since 'one' always requires 'two'. (Cooper, 1990/2023: 23-24, this issue)

The point is that any established form is itself the product of distinction or division, so that to think of something as an autonomous, finished form is to forget about what Cooper called the 'labour of division' (Cooper, 1989) that has made that form possible. For Cooper, contemporary society is characterized by this forgetting to such an extent that we mistakenly take forms, produced according to a logic of production and consumption, to be natural. In the process, the human subject loses contact with its own unformed nature in trying 'to deny its own openness' (Cooper, 1986/2023: 52,

this issue). In 'Organizational kitsch', also published in this issue for the first time, he laments that 'we testify to the efficacy of the production-consumption process which cocoons us from the strange and disturbing which nature (including 'human nature') represents' (Cooper, 1986/2023: 64 this issue).

The most recent paper by Cooper we publish here, from 2006, is also the one that is most explicitly about information, as its title 'Culture of information' suggests. At this point, the 'existential choice for man' to go with structure or with process, as Cooper (1976: 1001) puts it in 'The open field', has made way for a more complex analysis according to which 'Culture in this sense is a form of ventriloquism by which we project our mental and bodily needs and desires onto mute nature and thus make it speak back to us on our terms' (Cooper, 2006/2023, 119, this issue). The idea, and 'the problem of understanding information', is the same, but there is no trace of a heroic man standing at the centre, no single author of a life, or a text.

How to make sense with Cooper now?

As is probably true for all texts and contexts, those who read Cooper today read differently. Questions of 'reflexivity', once an invitation to engage in a certain amount of reflection about the epistemological conditions of social inquiry (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) have now become an urgent political demand. Any putative authority of talk and text is interrogated for its 'privilege' and must address its 'positionality'. Questions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and Judith Butler's 'endless etc' are foregrounded in ways that mean that being reflexive is understood as a questioning of the universality of the claims being made by the speaker/writer and their imagined community.

Here, and we are doing no more than the sort of throat clearing that seems necessary at the time of writing, it is necessary to acknowledge that Cooper was white, cis-male, heterosexual, and lower middle class, the son of a shopkeeper (Burrell and Parker, 2016: 1). Those who knew him can testify that he greatly enjoyed spending time in pubs with other men, was sometimes patronizing and uninterested in women, and was always patronizing and dismissive to academics who he felt lacked the sort of 'rigorous' imagination that he exemplified. His shorthand for this was people who studied

management, business, and organizational behaviour, all collectively dismissed as not really being concerned with serious theoretical issues. Perhaps he dismissed such people as pre-formed, simply reproducing the cliches of style and substance which they had been taught, and never being brave enough to challenge conventional wisdom.

Because here's the paradox. In most ways Cooper was himself very conventional, certain of his attitudes like many men of a certain age, prickly about his status and exemplifying a tradition of academic labour which arrogantly and unreflectively demanded freedom from the constraints of students, timetables, meetings, and management. Yet his work appears at points to transcend those foundational conditions, subjecting any and all concepts to a radical doubt which dissolves them into each other and di/vides in order to produce different visions, restlessly pulling things apart and sticking things together in order to express relation and movement. This, it seems to us, is not the sort of humanist and politicized reflexivity which assumes that the single human author of the text must be made responsible for their speech. Neither is it a position that would be sympathetic to the hot exchanges of identity politics. That sort of reflexivity is something that Cooper never really concerned himself with, as the exchanges with Cavalcanti in the interview show. He illustrates how he understands the dualisms of structuralism by suggesting that 'Men are men, sexually, physically, and so on, because they are not women and vice versa, and that's how we know' (Cavalcanti and Parker, 2023: 157, this issue). As we said, readers will read this differently now.

But Cooper's reflexivity is aimed at a different goal, not to make the embodied human accountable for their beliefs and utterances but to dissolve the very categories that allow us to draw lines between humans, ideas, and materials, as if they were separate things. Its contradictory, to say the least, that his mechanism for doing this was to deploy a form of romantic heroism which celebrated the human agent who was brave enough to engage in questing thought, to journey where others feared to tread. This was hard work, and 'rigour' was one of his terms of approval, implying that the thoughts needed some sort of hard labour to push them out of or into position.

The analogy between physical work and thought is a common one, often used by intellectuals and academics to provide a description of sitting at a desk, perhaps reading or writing. And for those who are reading Cooper now – whether putting his thought to work in a South American context, articulating him as a precursor to queer theory, using his work as an armature for empirical observation, or extending philosophical concepts – they would doubtless describe what they are doing as a form of labour too.

Of course, as is also clear from the five responses to Cooper in this issue, the directions and language of this labour is shaped by context, by the geographies and histories of the present. We might equally say then that reading and writing happens in particular ways because of the context, not only because of heroic labour by detached intellectuals on texts. Another way to suggest this, and one that we suspect Cooper might approve of, is to say that contexts produce texts, the con/text is always adjacent to the text, which is another way of suggesting that readers and writers are made by history. Rather than imagining a band of lone heroes in their attics struggling with ideas and rigorously compressing them into words, we would need to understand this special issue as part of the global university publishing system and the expansion of the business school in particular, the embedding of online access and repositories, the widespread dissemination of post-foundational language and 'critical' thinking within certain academic cohorts, the politics of identity, as well as all the political, cultural and social changes that have happened in the nearly half a century since the publication of Cooper's reading of Olson.

To begin the conversation about how we might be reading and writing with Cooper today, we will hear from Cooper himself. During the editorial process, one of the authors in this issue, Maria Fernanda Rios Cavalcanti, revealed that she had a transcript of an old interview she had conducted with Cooper, and kindly offered us the opportunity to read it. The conversation took place in a café in Liverpool, a city that was dear to Cooper and where the ghosts of the 1960s still lingered in more than memory. At one point in the interview, Cooper turns John Lennon's lyrics into what he liked to term a 'social philosophy', one in which the distinctions between bodies and thoughts, materials and ideas are constantly troubled. 'Penny Lane is in our ears and in our eyes' becomes not only poetry, but also a statement about social ontology.

And the slippage between these two terms is, we think, one of the ways to understand Cooper's work.

In the first of the response papers, Robin Holt and Mike Zundell connect Cooper's essay on Elias Canneti's notion of the command to strategy. They argue that strategy involves presenting the organization in a new way to itself by making distinctions. However, this process risks creating an outside that consists of excluded others, potentially fostering antagonism. The strategist, on this reading, is engaged in the paradoxical attempt to maintain a relation to the whole by means of making new distinctions and thereby new parts that, necessarily, involve a forgetting of the whole (or open field). Holt and Zundell develop their argument by engaging with several other sources who had a major impact on Cooper, especially Heidegger, Spencer Brown, and Bateson.

Then, in the first of our contributions from Brazil, where Cooper's work has been particularly influential, Maria Fernanda Rios Cavalcanti and André Luis Silva frame their ideas in terms of the postcolonial idea of anthropophagy, or radical hybridization based on the metaphor of the colonized eating the colonizer. Working with the texts 'Organizational kitsch' and 'Closed and open Systems' they show how Cooper's insights touch upon the notion of closed social systems or what he terms 'totalitarian kitsch'. Cavalcanti and Silva explore how conventional ideas about academic discipline perpetuate an academic status quo which prevents a critical questioning of epistemic justice. For them, inspired by Cooper, the process of reclaiming the position and role of the Other involves dismantling restrictive Western cultural elements grounded in the fictional foundations that underpin closed systems.

In a closely parallel way, Eloisio Moulin de Souza's reading of Cooper also pushes towards the creation of non-oppressive knowledge systems, in this case by applying the concepts of anthropomorphism and kitsch in order to queer the ontology of 'organization'. De Souza uses Cooper's concepts to demonstrate that gender norms are anthropomorphic and kitsch forms of organization themselves. Cooper's work is not 'about' gender, any more than it is 'about' postcolonialism, but de Souza encourages us to see that 'organization' is not an entity but a constant process of micro-ordering our lives and world-making. In this sense, binary sex identities are forms of organizing, an understanding which itself disrupts essentialist and realist

assumptions that organizations, as entities, are the proper object of organization studies.

Raviola, Gasparin, and Hansson's contribution draws on Cooper's theorization of institutional aesthetics and technology to consider community crafting emplaced at a recreational area in Gothenburg. They describe how the weaving of willow, the entanglement of materials, commons into being the boundaries and frames that make space, place, and the communities that inhabit them. They also reveal the challenge of drawing upon Cooper when engaging with empirical work; a challenge imbricated with both inspiration and fear of betrayal, yet one which they take on with considerable courage and aplomb.

Closing the issue, Damian O'Doherty's paper offers a reading of the most recent text by Cooper that is published in this issue – his 2006 piece 'The culture of information'. For O'Doherty, Cooper's essay provides us with an important encounter with today's forms of academic publishing, which are, as we have noted, all too formulaic. What Cooper brings to today's academic forms, O'Doherty argues, is an *un*formation, which is not only an idea that Cooper explores in the essay but also something that he performs in his writing. When we read Cooper we find ourselves in a strange non-place, where habitual and cultural forms are deformed and unformed and where we may find clues to what living in the Anthropocene could look like.

Poetry and text

One of the features of Cooper's writing that emerges from the discussions in these contributions is its distinctive, even paradoxical, texture. Just as Olson had asserted that 'form is never more than an extension of content', so too can we say that Cooper's post 1976 'style' is revealing in terms of what it shows us about his thought. His form is relentlessly serious and propulsive, impatiently moving from one concept and author to another without spending much time recapitulating or telling the reader where they are going, torturing the words he uses with slashes and hyphens, seemingly expecting the reader to just keep up. It's hard to read, and difficult to hang on to, because he expects so much of a reader who he never helps along.

These are also papers that rarely have clear beginnings or ends, but rather start somewhere in the middle of a chain of thought, and finish somewhere else, perhaps in the place that they started. Like the serpent Ouroboros, as readers we eat our own tail, going round in circles following an etymological chain and ending in the place we began. It is rare that his work explicitly makes any claims to be 'contributing' to a particular 'debate', or 'joining a conversation', which is the standard advice which any aspirant academic would be given if they wanted to 'submit' to a journal such as *Human Relations*, and be 'accepted'. Such metaphors are ones that stress the importance of joining a community of thought, of making your thought useful for that subdiscipline by providing connections and citations to what has already been said. The implicit instruction is not to stick out too much, to make some minor offering to what everyone else is talking about. This makes a virtue out of accepting pre-formed topics and concepts because they become the criteria for deciding whether an author has something to say to a field. Even those papers of Cooper's which have been published in high status journals don't do much in terms of this sort of academic etiquette, the obliging top and tail, and one suspects that those which do appear in these outlets were largely inserted *post-hoc* in response to demands from journal editors. (Such as the story that Cooper tells Cavalcanti about the conditions under which Martin Parker, the then editor of *Organization*, accepted Cooper's paper on 'the generalised social body' in 2010.)

The papers that we reprint here were mostly written for presentation at various workshops and conferences and are thus lacking the kind of typical editorial interventions which might make them more accommodating to a reader. This gives them a curiously glaciate surface – cool and flat with very few flourishes or literary arabesques. It seems then that Cooper just writes rather than engaging in a long and painful editing process. Yet when one of the authors of the present editorial tried to write with him, the attempt to make even an apparently very minor editorial intervention – removing what seemed like a repetition – resulted in a very cold conversation indeed, a conversation that ultimately led to the decision to write adjacently, not together (Parker and Cooper, 1998). To focus on the surface of Cooper's texts is misleading because what appears to be, at first sight, the standard horizontal plane of academic writing was actually carefully sculpted, with a

particular sensitivity to lexical choice and the placement of a comma, sometimes taking hours to find the right word (Burrell and Parker, 2016: 10). In terms of the way he thought and talked about it, writing seemed very much like labour to Cooper. A day of that would need to be followed by an evening of beer in a pub in Liverpool.

This is not the way that 'academics' usually think about writing, if they think about it very much at all. In the sciences, and those parts of the social sciences that wish to approximate to science, 'writing up' is what happens after the research has taken place. As we suggested at the beginning of this piece, it is often assumed to be a practice that transmits information from one person to another and is hence stripped of as much ostensible decoration as possible at the same time that complex sentence structure and neologism ensure that its genre is unsubtly marked as 'advanced academic' (Billig, 2013). But Cooper's writing, both in words and concepts, seems to be far more contrived in the sense that his style was integral to the substance – his 'medium was his message'. While this particular framing comes from the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, Cooper too very often worries at the terms 'medium' and 'media' as that which lies in between, both suturing and severing, constructing both sides of what seems to be a dualism (e.g. Cooper, 1983). The media is information. That which lies between is always in formation, organizing thought.

This is not to say that he was writing poetry, although his work does contain references to Rimbaud, Keats, Valéry, and others. Rather, he seems to have imagined that he was reaching for the poetic in the sense of *poiesis*, a kind of creation. This is not 'writing up', but writing as a kind of making in which the words and things are conjoined reflections of an attempt to reach for or illuminate something dimly understood. No wonder he was interested in the concept of autopoiesis, the notion of 'self-making' from general systems theory (e.g. Cooper, 2006). In his explicit references, this was a way of conjuring a relational and processual sense of the genesis and maintenance of social systems, but we can inflect this with a kind of heroism too. The self-made man is one who struggles with the world, who shapes and carves people and things into configurations that reflect their desires.

Cooper's theory, and Cooper's practice, were both autopoetic in different ways and it is their conjoined nature – the unity of form and content – that makes his work so compelling. His texts from 'The open field' onwards cross and recross a landscape of (post)structural and cultural thought from the 1960s onwards which is now recognizable to anyone who is interested in contemporary social theory. In terms of organization theory, he insists that the concept 'organization' is not reducible to organizations as entities, but is instead an opening to think ontologically (and also epistemologically) about what it means to be human. In this, his pushing back against the preformed and his exploration of an open field in which the human and the non-human divide and inform is very contemporary indeed, as we try to understand how to organize on an increasingly divided and turbulent planet.

references

Anderson, P. (1998) *The origins of postmodernity*. London: Verso.

Bass, B.M., R. Cooper and J.A. Haas (eds.) (1970) *Managing for accomplishment*. Lexington: Heath Lexington Books.

Billig, M. (2013) *How to write badly. How to succeed in the social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Birkinshaw, J., M.P. Healey, R. Suddaby and K. Weber (2014) 'Debating the future of management research', *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(1): 38-55.

Böhm, S. and C. Jones (eds.) (2001) 'Responding: To Cooper', *ephemera*, 1(4): 314-320.

Bourdieu, P. and L. Wacquant (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Burrell, G. and M. Parker (eds.) (2016) *For Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge.

Burrell, G. and G. Morgan (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. London: Heinemann.

Chia, R. (ed.) (1998a) *Organized worlds: Explorations in technology and organization with Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge.

Chia, R. (ed.) (1998b) *In the realm of organization: Essays for Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge.

Clarke, T. (1991) *Charles Olson: The allegory of a poet's life*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Cooper, R. (ed.) (1953) 'Nine American poets', *Artisan* (no. 2, spring 1953). Liverpool: Heron Press.

Cooper, R. and G. Turnbull (eds.) (1954) 'New Canadian poetry', *Artisan* (no. 6, autumn 1954). Liverpool: Heron Press.

Cooper, R. (1976) 'The open field', *Human Relations*, 29(11): 999-1017.

Cooper, R. (1983) 'The other: A model of human structuring', in G. Morgan (ed.) *Beyond method: Strategies for social research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Cooper, R. (1986) 'Organization/disorganization', *Social Science Information*, 25(2): 299-335.

Cooper, R. (1986/2023) 'Notes on organizational kitsch', *ephemera*, 23(3): 55-66.

Cooper, R. (1989) 'The visibility of social systems', in M.C. Jackson, P. Keys and S.A. Cropper (eds.) *Operational research and the social sciences*. New York: Plenum.

Cooper, R. (1990/2023) 'Canetti's sting', *ephemera*, 23(3): 21-36.

Cooper R. (2001) 'Un-timely mediations: Questing thought', *ephemera,* 1(4): 321-347.

Cooper, R. (2006) 'Making present: Autopoiesis as human production', *Organization*, 13(1): 59-81.

Cooper, R. (2006/2023) 'The culture of information', *ephemera*, 23(3): 119-141.

Cooper, R. (2010) 'The generalized social body: Distance and technology', *Organization*, 17(2): 242-256.

Cooper R. and G. Burrell (1988) 'Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis 1: An introduction', *Organization Studies*, 10(4): 479-502.

Golding, A. (1990) 'Little magazines and alternative canons: The example of *origin*', *American Literary History*, 2(4): 691-725.

Kwansky, M. (ed.) (2004) *Toward the open field: Poets and the art of poetry 1800-1950*. Middletown: Wesleyan Univeristy Press.

Mossin, A. (2005) '"In thicket": Charles Olson, Frances Boldereff, Robert Creeley and the crisis of masculinity at mid-century', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28(4): 13-39.

Olson, C. (1950) 'Projective Verse'. [https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Projective_Verse.pdf]

Parker, M. (2023) 'Against management: Auto-critique', *Organization,* 30(2): 407-415.

Parker, M. and R. Cooper (1998) 'Cyborganization: Cinema as nervous system', in J. Hassard and R. Holliday (eds.) *Organization - representation: Work and organization in popular culture.* London: Sage.

Plotnikof, M., C. Vásquez, T. Kuhn and D. Mumby (2022) 'Towards a politics of dis/organization: Relations of dis/order in organization theory and practice', *ephemera*, 22(1).

the editors

Sverre Spoelstra is an associate professor at Copenhagen Business School and at Lund University. His research interests include leadership, organizational philosophy, work/play and digitalization. He is an affiliate member of *ephemera*.
Email: sverre.spoelstra@fek.lu.se

Martin Parker works at the University of Bristol Business School, UK. His last few books were 'Shut Down the Business School', 'Anarchism, Organization and Management' and 'Life After COVID19'.
Email: martin.parker@bristol.ac.uk

Simon Lilley is Professor of Organisational Studies and Management and Director of Research for Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln, U.K. Simon has a first degree in Psychology from University College London and a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. He has previously taught at the Universities of Edinburgh, Manchester, Glasgow, Keele, Lancaster, Leicester, the University for Humanist Studies, Utrecht and the International Business School, Budapest. His primary research interests are around Organisation Studies, Social Studies of Science and Technology, Social Studies of Finance, and Digitalisation.
Email: slilley@lincoln.ac.uk

Lena Olaison is an Associate Professor at the Department of Busines Humanities and Law, Copenhagen Business School, and a happy member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
Email: lo.bhl@cbs.dk