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The aesthetics of story-telling as a technology of the plausible



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that that which philosophers consider as being included in the domain of the aesthetic is a crucial aspect determining the plausibility of a narrative; that plausibility actually plays a more significant role than probability in many cognitive processes of deliberation and decision making; and that the aesthetics of story-telling is a technology of the plausible.

We offer two case-studies, one an ancient account of deliberation and decision making, the other from a modern newspaper article, to illustrate our argument that the aesthetic is an essential element in various stages of the process of decision making, from determining what needs to be decided, through identifying the basis for decision making, to the act of decision making itself. In that context, we highlight the role of the aesthetic in the framing of future possibilities in the process of scenario planning.

In conclusion, we propose that focusing on the aesthetics of story-telling as a technology to create and share plausibility is a useful way to analyse scenario stories in scenario-planning work; we hope that it may be a useful concept with which to develop further research in this area.

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1. Introduction

In November 2013, the Spanish Economics Minister, Luis de Guindos, attempted to halt the appointment of José María Roldán as President of the Spanish Banking Association (AEB), which represents all commercial banks in the country. The reason given was that, at the time, Roldán was still heading the Financial Regulation and Stability Department at the Bank of Spain. De Guindos' objection was not worded as having to do with a conflict of interest or put forth on ethical grounds. Instead, noting that Roldán, "a person who until very recently has participated in the preparation of the financial rules that have led to a crisis and a ransom of 40,000 million (euros)", . . . would now "paid by the taxpayer,...remain in a senior accountability position in the sector", the Minister argued that this change from regulator to the regulated sector was not "estético – it was not "aesthetic" (de Barrón, 2013). Why would a minister of economics in one of the countries that was most strongly hit by the global financial crisis say that the issue he had with this appointment was "(un)aesthetic"?

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This curious choice of terms did not go unnoticed at the time; in fact, it prompted 95 on-line comments posted within 48 hours on the website of the daily newspaper *El País*, mostly making fun of his choice. A year later, in November 2014 – as we started writing this paper – over 690,000 items appeared when one Googled the original *El País* headline “*Guindos expresa a la banca su ‘malestar’ con su nuevo presidente*” (or “Guindos expresses his malaise regarding the new president to the banking sector”). Many of these were comments suggesting that Guindo’s own “aesthetics” were also to be questioned, including those involved in his having himself moved from investment banker to minister. In the end, the Minister’s views had little effect: Roldán was unanimously elected to the position for an initial four-year term – so although De Guindos found his behaviour ugly, not enough people shared his perspective. This event illustrates the central point for our investigation in this paper, which argues for the importance of developing a better understanding of the creation of plausible arguments, and, specifically, the role of the aesthetic in the generation of plausibility.

The core of our argument rests on the proposition that that which philosophers consider to be included in the domain of “the aesthetic” is a crucial aspect determining the plausibility of a narrative – and this matters insofar as plausibility may play a more significant role than probability in many cognitive processes of deliberation and decision making (Selin & Pereira 2013; Selin, 2011; Ramirez & Selin, 2014, with regard specifically to scenario planning). Here, we focus on the role of “the aesthetic” in the framing of future possibilities (cf. Judge, 1991), and suggest that achieving aesthetic excellence in stories enables scenario planners to excel at conveying plausible futures and the insights these hold to decision-makers in ways that are helpful to them in their framing of decision possibilities (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Ramirez & Wilkinson, 2016).

We describe the aesthetics of story-telling as a “technology” of plausibility. This may not be self-evident to futures scholars unfamiliar with social and technology studies (STS), but to those that are, it appears natural to consider a story (particularly if it has been written or recorded or is retold repeatedly) as a “frozen” insight and knowledge, accumulated over time, which can be used in different contexts, again and again, to enable sense giving and sense-making (as Weick, 1995; 60–61). Latour (e.g., 2002) and other STS scholars have looked at how technologies encapsulate human action, freeze it, and make it available in contexts other than the one in which it arose. As Hutchins (1995) found in studying navigators in the South seas, technologies enable practices, and their successful use enables practitioner excellence. We stress that this technology can be wielded in a number of different ways, and suggest that this idea may be a fruitful concept for further research, opening up insights into how plausibility is generated, manifested, shared, used, and valued.

The aesthetics of story-telling and story-sharing is, in fact, a very widespread and long-running technology. Across cultures, humans employ narratives to make sense of events and experiences in the world around them, to share and test them with others with whom they might need to address the challenges and to exploit the opportunities these entail. Stories are not only factual descriptions, they manifest and convey implicit knowledge and are thus inescapably also experienced in aesthetic terms, expressing and conveying considerations of what “feels right”. It may be that the ubiquity of this technology has paradoxically made it and the roles it plays less visible – and seem less salient – than it deserves to be. This technology complements other technologies of the plausible, such as causal maps and graphic system diagrams (Wilkinson & Ramirez, 2016). We can compare it to pencils and paper perhaps: while the technology is very widespread and well accepted, it is rarely considered as a technology, precisely because it has become so very common. Like pencils and paper, the ubiquity and wide use of this technology of story-telling means it no longer requires a user manual: people (particularly in oral societies, but also in literate ones using writing and reading extensively) grow up with this technology. But in this paper, we propose to bring it back into view, to foreground it, and to explore it by delving into how it plays a role in shaping and co-producing the plausibility of a story in ways that makes the story useful in decision making and strategy (see Wilkinson, 2009). There is a huge literature on studies of strategy as narrative, of organisations as narratives, and of futures in terms of narrative (recent examples from this journal include Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015; Raven & Elahi, 2015). We acknowledge but do not marshal these important literatures in this paper, which concentrates instead on the role of the aesthetics of story-telling as a technology of the plausible. Below we present first our understanding of aesthetics, then of plausibility; we examine the relationship between the two, and how aesthetics in stories can be understood as a technology of plausibility; finally, we illustrate our argument with two case studies.

2. What is aesthetics?¹

Philosophy explores how we experience and perceive, how we conceive and understand and order, how we know ourselves and the world(s) we inhabit and bring about, and how all of these are inter-related. The study of aesthetics in philosophy deals with those understandings, perceptions, conceptions, and experiences that we qualify (often after the fact) with adjectives such as ‘beautiful’, ‘ugly’, ‘elegant’, or ‘repulsive’. Aesthetic knowledge is considered to depend largely on sensing and feeling, on empathy and intuition, and on critically examining how we relate conception to perception, without as well as with words: it offers “sensory knowing versus intellectual/propositional knowing” (Taylor & Hansen, 2005).

There is growing evidence from cognitive psychology and neurobiology (Damasio, 2000) that aesthetic forms of knowing precede other forms, and shape how these other forms of knowing operate. This had already been proposed by philosophers such as Cassirer (1964) and Langer (1942). If so, the pattern recognition involved in sense perception and the forming of ideas, precedes the formalisation of these into concepts and their manifestation as words. Thus in mathematics “the

¹ This section draws in part from Ramirez (2005).

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