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fillip to new research that can combine process and temporality perspectives more intimately and offer better guidance in today's highly volatile and uncertain environment where organizations must constantly reinvent themselves to survive. Theorizing, however, is a slow process, so, as they say, all in good time.

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Media Review: The Happy Worker – Or How Work Was Sabotaged

John Webster

The Happy Worker – Or How Work Was Sabotaged

Finland: Yellow Film and TV, 2022.

Reviewed by: Zahira Jaser, *University of Sussex Business School, UK*, and Mats Alvesson, *Lund University, Sweden*

What has the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*, written in 1944 by the CIA's precursor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), to do with today's world of work? Much, according to John Webster and Evelina Kantola, authors of *The Happy Worker*, a documentary describing how work has been sabotaged – as suggested by the subtitle. Filmed mostly in London's corporate district, but also in other corporate offices around the world, the documentary wittily starts by highlighting six norms that sabotage work today: (i) interrupt work as often as possible; (ii) arrange meetings when there is more important work to do; (iii) multiply paperwork; (iv) all decision should be taken to a committee; (v) make 'speeches', bringing up irrelevant issues; (vi) three people have to approve anything when one would be enough. How come these practices, designed to cripple enemy

organizations, have now been accepted as, if not the norm, at least common practice in our workplaces? This is the starting point of this realistic, visually enjoyable exploration of the misery that riddles modern workplaces. To look for answers the documentary develops in two directions: the working narratives of six people, the participants of a workshop on work-related stress, are intertwined with interventions by three academics, the anthropologist David Graeber, the organization theorist André Spicer and the social psychologist Christina Maslach, plus the chief scientist of workplace and well-being at Gallup, Jim Harter. Additionally, as the narration proceeds, animation and artwork in the background magnify data and graphs from several sources corroborating what the workers and the academics are reflecting on.

Breaking down, burning out and the body

A powerful aspect of the documentary is the way in which the six workshop participants' personal lived experience is highlighted throughout. Their words seamlessly corroborate complex concepts, such as burnout, shame, identity. Burnout (Maslach, 2006) certainly occupies a central stage – with the six participants' initial enthusiasm, dedication and commitment fading into exhaustions, cynicism and ineffectiveness. Their careers seem to be characterized by a common cycle: enchantment, illusion, exhaustion, failure and shame. All high achievers, they blindly followed the promise of success, often pushed by their families' expectations, and excelled at university to enter the world of work with a great sense of promise. 'I just thought I would become a successful career woman,' says Hazel Lee from South Korea; 'I had the image that when I was a lawyer, I would be able to help,' says Vanessa Törnblom, a participant from Finland.

While burnout is a response to chronic stressors that have not been successfully managed, all workers saw the psychological depletion and physical exhaustion as a personal failure. All worked very hard until their bodies collapsed; many tell of not being able to get out of bed, of going to the doctor and being prescribed time off. We see the documentary missing an opportunity to recognize the importance of the body as an agent of work, instead tapping too deeply into the 'mainstream' conversation about burnout as a psychological phenomenon. Given the participants' accounts of physical collapse, the author could have explored in greater depth the underestimated importance of the body in the workplace: 'Bodies are far more than vehicles that enable work to be undertaken but are agentive actors in the constitution of work and working selves' (Harding, Gilmore, & Ford, 2022, p. 649). Instead, the documentary develops by weaving through two themes: one utilizing the Goffmanian metaphors of the front and back stage, whereby workers fall under the spell of the social illusion put up by the corporations, suffering behind the scenes (Alvesson, 2022); the other demonstrating that work is constructed in often absurd ways, resenting bullshit (Graeber, 2013; Spicer, 2020), at the expense of the worker.

Emptiness, jargon and mediocre managers

The theatrical metaphor is revealed as the participants, one by one, come to the realization that the charade of the happy worker is only perpetuated because people maintain a façade of perfection – keeping doubts, failures, bodily weaknesses and ambivalent emotions about their working lives to the backstage. Bernardo Alves, a software developer, admits that behind his 'happy masks' there were often sad faces. Yet, everyone thinks – or pretends – that the mask is real. Shame emerges as a crucial factor in the reluctance to lower the mask. Everyone hides so much of themselves, that people cannot be honest about so many things, including bodily weaknesses and poor well-being. This 'pluralistic ignorance' (Maslach, 2006), key for the charade of the happy worker to continue, is supported by empty work, scripted jargon and the mediocrity of managers.

The triumph of empty work

The documentary relies heavily on the idea of an empty dystopian future. For Graeber this emptiness emerges with the creation of the ‘office job’ at the beginning of the 20th century. Contrary to what was predicted by the economist John Maynard Keynes – who in the 1930s thought that technology would allow us to work a 15 hour working week – the bureaucratization of work has seen the rise of the office job from 25% to 75% in last 100 years (Graeber, 2013). Graeber describes a meaningless world of work, where workers feel their job is bullshit, pointless, unnecessary, to the point that if it disappeared, it would make no difference. This excessively pessimistic view entails that back-stage people are mostly unhappy, cogs in a meaningless system focusing on shareholder return. This leaves a hollow front-stage corporate image (stock photography, advertising, job posting, corporate jargon) showing an effortless beautiful corporate life. We agree that most literature on HRM, leadership, successful companies and so on portrays working life in pink and gold – everything else is a failure and deviation from the ideal way of doing it. It all expresses a society and organizational world much into grandiosity (Alvesson, 2022). This contrast leaves each worker feeling they are the only one failing under the pressure – of more meetings, tighter deadlines, never-ending restructuring, impossible decision-making loops, repeated waves of redundancies. Instead, these are all forms of sabotage. Work is therefore riddled by system-level failings, parts of a sabotage manual, which have now become routine organizational practices, which send people crazy.

The adoption of scripted corporate jargon

To cover up all this, Spicer tells us, corporate jargon is designed to create empty meanings. Language in the corporation is often created, circulated and consumed with little respect for or relationship to reality, resembling bullshit (Spicer, 2020). This social construction of the corporation has been carefully engineered. Spicer illustrates this through the example of Pacific Bell, where organizational development specialist Charles Krone was tasked with transforming how people think, talk and behave. Krone’s training ideas were based on the teachings of the 20th-century Russian mystic George Gurdjieff. His doctrine highlighted how habits turn us into ‘waking sleep’ beings, so that breaking these habits is the only way to liberate our potential. Employees learnt the importance of ‘alignment’, ‘intentionality’ and ‘end-state vision’. The new jargon has become a trademark of corporate culture worldwide: ‘ideation’, ‘imagineering’ and ‘inboxing’ are just some of the new words. After spending \$40m putting their employees through the new training programme, the project was suspended as too cultish and authoritarian, but the language of managers was born. Language therefore becomes a vehicle for the meaninglessness of action, to fulfil corporate objectives that are often far from clear (Alvesson, 2022).

The mediocrity of managers

We could not have a documentary about (un)happiness at work without mentioning the misery of management. Here Gallup’s Jim Harter highlights one of the main downside of managers. They are not hired because they are good at dealing with people, but mostly are people placed in managerial positions because of tenure and because they are successful individual contributors. The workshop participants concur that good managers are rare, and it is almost impossible to have a good conversation that touches upon personal circumstances, real life issues, and go beyond task-led conversations. When speaking to managers the mask must stay on, perpetuating the charade of corporate life. As we explain below, we find some of the above takes a little simplistic; for example,

depicting the manager as the ultimate corporate villain comes at the risk of ignoring the difficulty of the managerial role in corporate life (Jaser, 2021; Toegel, Levy, & Jonsen, 2022).

Realistic metaphor, with a touch of naivety

The Happy Worker is a somewhat realistic and very entertaining documentary that speaks to the many people who have ever worked in an office. It is light, full of wisdom and great examples. We enjoyed the documentary and think it could be useful in education and research, both for undergraduates and MBAs. It indeed prompts reflection on what a workplace should *not* look like. However, we find its somewhat excess negativity is often steeped in an aura of naivety – perhaps repeating one too many times the classic story of the suffering, oppressed worker.

A way for the documentary to be more novel would have been to connect the workshop participants' arguments to recent research. For example, we would have liked to see the 'agency of the flesh', the 'body' more at the centre of the conversation (Harding et al., 2022). Most of the interviewed people stopped working because of physical breakdown, yet they seemed completely insensitive to the physical signal of breakdown. Hence there was a real opportunity to speak about the importance of bodies at work. Bodies are key in the formation of our work identity, work routines and work breakdown; this realization can be important for creating more inclusive organizations if the needs of the body are taken into account (Harding et al., 2022).

Further, in the era of surveillance and depersonalization we think the documentary misses an opportunity to dive into modern debates about secrecy, and the difficult role of being a manager (Jaser, 2021; Toegel et al., 2022). For example, research shows that the 'mask' needs to stay on, especially if you are a manager, as managers uphold the secrecy that is so much criticised by the documentary (Toegel et al., 2022). This research also shows that if 'managed carefully, secrecy enhances receptivity' of change of corporate policies and can be used to aid employees (Toegel et al., 2022, p. 885). Managers are depicted as the culprit in corporate evil, rather than being sometimes the victim of bad working regimes and other times the potential solutions for alleviation of the systemic pain generated by the corporation (see Jaser, 2021). We wonder how many of the workshop participants were managers themselves; we count potentially two.

We saw an almost excessive emphasis on the psychological aspects of burnout – an 'oldish' debate that may put excessive pressure on the individual and less on the institution. While there may be many workplaces where the human side of work is repressed, people are miserable and there is little 'people management' of high quality, the documentary ignores the psychosocial benefits that work brings. In this sense it might be naïve for corporates to be solely focused on the needs and wants of employees, as this could be at the expense of those supposed to benefit from the work, including customers, clients, patients, tax payers etc. Additionally, in the documentary there is little connection between the six burnout victims and the general critique of management and corporate trends. The six sabotaging mechanisms or practices are not so visible in the accounts of the six people, often referring to their own ambitions and ideas about performance as creating difficulties. Hence if used educationally, we think it could be integrated with contemporary research which highlights the positive human aspects of management and work, and ways to mitigate the downside of organizations.

We wonder whether the documentary could have finished on a positive note. But yet again, this is not an American Hollywood movie, but a Nordic documentary where realism is preferred to forced happy endings.

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