

# The theology of managerial superordinancy

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## Nota Introdutória

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A Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão (ESTG) do Instituto Politécnico da Guarda (IPG) congratula-se pelo facto do Professor Doutor *David Crowther*, da *London Metropolitan University*, Reino Unido ter aceite o convite para realizar uma visita de trabalho e investigação científica a decorrer entre os dias 9 a 15 de Novembro de 2002. Temos a certeza que com esta visita será possível desenvolver um debate privilegiado entre toda a comunidade Docente e Discente.

É igualmente um enorme privilégio dar início à série *Estudos e Documentos de Trabalho* com seis *papers* da autoria do Professor David Crowther. Esperemos que este seja o estímulo e o incentivo que falta para que, em particular a comunidade académica da ESTG, apresente trabalhos científicos que estimulem a discussão científica.

Não se poderá deixar de agradecer à Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia que, através do Fundo de Apoio à Comunidade Científica, generosamente aceitou a nossa candidatura, bem como todos aqueles que directa e indirectamente contribuíram para a sua concretização.

*Constantino Rei*

Professor Doutor do Departamento de Gestão  
Director da Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do IPG

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# The theology of managerial superordinancy

por

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Com o apoio da:

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<sup>1</sup> Paper apresentado no âmbito da visita do Professor David Crowther à ESTG-IPG nos dias 9 a 15 de Novembro de 2002.

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## The theology of managerial superordinancy

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### Introduction

The idea of the epic story is one which permeates history (Campbell 1949, 1991) to such an extent that it can be considered to be omnipresent. Campbell is the most significant student of epic stories and myths in a world context; he described his work (see Cousineau & Brown 1990) as an attempt to tell the story of humankind as the 'One Great Story'. By this he meant the saga of the spiritual awakening of mankind and the subsequent development of society. He believed that the many differing mythical and religious beliefs which are present throughout the world and throughout history, while seeming to be disparate, are neither discrete nor unique. Instead each is simply a cultural or ethnic manifestation of the elemental ideals which have forever transfixed the human psyche. Campbell adopted a comparative historical approach to mythology, religion and literature but, unlike most scholars, rather than concentrating upon differences he concentrated upon similarities. He was convinced that common themes and images could reveal mankind's common psychological roots. He argued that the recognition we have of images from primal cultures, contemporary work and from different cultures reflects the common spiritual ground from which all human life springs.

Although old myths were a way of explaining the origins of the world and of humanity they also played a vital role in uniting a society. Campbell argued that this cohesive role remains crucial today and so myths remain relevant to us today. Indeed he demonstrates that these myths continue to be reinvented in modern form. For individuals these myths provide a source of strength and a sense of roots and values; they offer a mirror to reveal the source of our anxieties and the means by which they might be resolved. In this respect his work parallels that of Jung and of Bruno Bettelheim concerning fairy stories. Campbell argues that the function of ritual is to give a form to human life and to mark the passage from one part of that life to the next. He states that the reservation of such ritual for exceptional occasions in modern society is one source of neuroticism and contrasts the present with the way ritual was embedded in all social occasions in older more stable societies. He also identifies the common archetypes prevalent in myth and compares them to the archetypes revealed in psychoanalytic writings and in dreams. His concern however is with the relevance of all of this to present day life.

It can be argued that the present is an age of the instantaneous organisation, where speed is of the essence, life revolves around the signs and symbols of culture. At least it might be argued that this is the nature of the present. But as space and time become compressed into irrelevance what emerges is a different form of atemporality. This takes the form of the myth. As Nietzsche (1956: 156) states, 'Only a horizon ringed about by myth can unify a culture.'

Spaciality and temporality are compressed in the eternal present which must ignore the past and focus upon a future which will be ever better. Thus the concept of speed provides an idea of progress towards that better future but in reality is simply a statement which privileges a future that is separate from and more important than the present. This disconnection between the present and the future relies upon a notion of time but a corollary to this is the notion that

self is more important than the other. This is when speed becomes dangerous – when self is privileged over the other – for speed is not dangerous when self is turned towards other<sup>1</sup>. But the acceleration of the pace of life only raises, alongside it, the need to seek solace in an atemporal present and thereby a need to reinvent and refocus the universal myths and epic stories, particularly those involving ‘the hero’. The epic story involving the hero has been summarized by Campbell (1988: xii) as:

‘A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.’

In this paper therefore the modern myths of the hero are explored in the context of managerial behaviour in organisations. This is explored through a consideration of corporate reporting. In order to explore this there is a need first to consider the psychoanalysis of managerial behaviour before considering the mythic dimension of such reporting.

### *The psychoanalysis of managerial behaviour*

According to Crowther (2002), although organisational performance is normally presented as a dialectical performance along the two incompatible dimensions of financial performance and social performance, this is in fact a false dialectic. Although the annual reporting of organisations presents it as such, empirical evidence demonstrates that organisations actually perform equally well along both dimensions. Thus that dialectic is a construction inherent in annual reports which is created and maintained through the semiotic of these reports, to such an extent that the perception of the dialectic as extant is generally accepted within the discourse of both corporate reporting and of accounting theory. Thus the dialectic appears in a form which is believed so absolute<sup>2</sup> that an alternative becomes inconceivable; it has therefore assumed the mantle of a myth (Cassirer 1946, Miller 1992). Indeed the proponents of environmental accounting and reporting found their analysis upon the existence of this dialectic. It therefore becomes necessary to consider why, if this dialectic does not in fact exist, it is created through the semiotic of the corporate annual reporting mechanism.

If the dialectic does not exist in corporate performance itself then its creation in the annual report must be undertaken by either the authors of the script of that report or by the readers of that reporting script. Although it has been argued that the semiotic is created by the reader of the report based upon his or her understanding of the contents of that report, the implication of this is that each person produces an interpretation based upon the linguistic, social and environmental experiences which underpin any understanding. Thus each person creates an individual semiotic (Habermas 1971) from the information available to him / her but moreover seeks to create a semiotic understanding based upon the intentions of the group which holds power (Lakoff 1975). That group is of course the authors of the script who are at the same time the managers of the organisation<sup>2</sup>. For that semiotic to be created, however, in such a way that the dialectic between the internal (or traditional accounting) and the external (or social) perspectives upon corporate performance is understood to exist, it is of course necessary that sufficient signals are created within the text for the semiotic to be extracted as a general interpretation. It is in this method that the author’s meaning is reinstated in the text (Gadamer 1975). The only people with the power to achieve this are of course the authors of

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.changeworks.org.uk](http://www.changeworks.org.uk) for the work of Crowther & Hosking in this area.

<sup>2</sup> More specifically it is the dominant coalition of managers.

the text. Hence it must be concluded that the dialectic of corporate reporting is both created and maintained by the managers of the organisation. It therefore becomes necessary to consider why this might be so.

The management of an organisation tends to be treated as a discrete entity<sup>3</sup> but it is important to remember that this entity actually comprises a set of individuals with their own drives motivations and desires. Thus every individual has a desire to fulfil his / her needs and one of these is self-actualisation (Maslow 1954). This need is the one at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and consequently perhaps the one most considered in terms of motivation. The next two most important needs – the need for esteem (as reflected in self respect and the respect of others) and the need for love and belonging (as reflected in the need for being an integral part of a community) – are however more important for the understanding of the behaviour of the members of the dominant coalition of management within an organisation. These two needs help explain why managers, in common with other individuals, need to feel important, skilled and essential to organisational performance.

A more suitable basis for arriving at a deeper understanding of the drivers of management behaviour, when considered from the point of view of the behaviour and motivations of individual managers of the organisation, is however based upon a psychoanalytic interpretation. Psychoanalytic theory was created initially by Freud but has been widely adapted by others. In a general sense such theory can be considered to be a theory of human emotional behaviour. An investigation of some of the major perspectives is necessary in order to understand the implications for managerial behaviour.

In his psychoanalytic theory Freud (1984)<sup>4</sup> argues that the real motivation for any act undertaken by a person may be disguised and not apparent even to the person who performs that act. Thus for Freud the underlying basis for identity, and therefore for an explanation of individual behaviour, was based in the unconscious. He argued that an individual's identity was based upon past experience which was largely unconscious and that behaviour was largely dependant upon an attempt to resolve the conflicts and motivations inherent in the unconscious (Freud 1975). Furthermore he stated (1976, 1977) that most aspects of identity are laid down in early childhood and that it is an attempt to integrate the various facets of childhood experience which leads a person to act in particular ways. Part of this conflict is based upon parental influence, which leads to the development within the child of the concept of the ideal self as the perfect being to strive to become in order to win parental approval. This ideal self is of course unattainable but adult life, and the actions undertaken by adults, is based upon an unconscious motivation to achieve this ideal self and thereby secure respect. This motivation has been expressed by psychoanalysts as the drive towards individuation and explains the continual need for reassurance and the gaining of both self-respect and the respect of others<sup>5</sup>.

This drive for individuation is manifest in different ways by different individuals and in different ways at different times by the same individual. This has been interpreted by Bettelheim (1976) as part of the search for meaning to life through the reintegration of the conscious and the unconscious (Bettelheim 1984). It has been described (Fromm 1974) as a battle between the opposing instincts of life and death or between the idealist and materialist

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<sup>3</sup> Or rather a coalition which acts in unison.

<sup>4</sup> All references to Freud's work are based, not upon the original works, but rather upon the standard English translations collected as the Penguin Freud Library.

<sup>5</sup> Self respect is of course merely a mirror of the respect of others – see Lacan (1988).

strivings of the individual (Fromm 1980). For some people this can be reflected in a drive towards conformity as a means of escaping from the isolation of the self. This is described by Fromm (1957: 16-17) in the following terms:

'...a union in which the individual self disappears to a large extent, and where the aim is to belong to the herd. If I am like everybody else, if I have no feelings or thoughts which make me different, if I conform in custom, dress, to the pattern of the group, I am saved; saved from the frightening experience of aloneness.'

In extreme circumstances this can result in a person resorting to madness by attempting to hold what Laing (1961) describes as an untenable position. They can also result in paranoid behaviour through the dominance of feelings of guilt (Klein 1932) or in psychosis (Lawrence 1995). Lawrence (1995: 16) argues that the anxieties of childhood remain dominant in the adult mind as part of the reality of the external world, stating:

'This results in the inner world having primacy over the information received from the outer world. There ceases to be transactions between the two through the ego function and external reality is less important than that construed by the inner world of the mind. Consequently, against all the evidence, so to speak, phantasies are held to be annihilated, made dead, murdered, and wiped out so that one can no longer exist. These come to have an urgency for the individual that belies what reality may be.'

All these arguments naturally have consequences for an individual which affect the behaviour of that individual. When these individuals are managers of an organisation they also naturally have implications for the organisation as well and Sievers (1994) has described this as leading to organisational psychotic behaviour. These interpretations of individual behaviour naturally apply to all people. As far as individual managers are concerned however the implication of these Freudian arguments is that managers are motivated by unconscious conflicts and desires which they seek to reconcile through acting out these conflicts as part of their desire for individuation. One way in which they can act out these desires which differs from other people is through their role within the organisation<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore these arguments imply that all individuals are anxious and insecure and seek to reduce anxiety and increase security through their actions. Thus the drive to reduce anxiety is manifest in the desire to seek confirmation of worth from others in order to increase self-esteem. Managers of large organisations are in a particularly powerful position to achieve this end through their actions as they are in a position to influence a large number of people. Employees of the organisation can be directly influenced by such managers but greater self-esteem can be gained from the respect of peers rather than subordinates<sup>7</sup>. Thus the respect of other managers in comparable positions in other organisations is particularly desirable as a means of reinforcing self-esteem.

One of the inevitable consequences of the insecurities surrounding a person's estimation of his / her own worth is that others in comparable positions are deemed to be more worthy than is oneself. Consequently it can be argued that each manager deems other managers in other organisations as more worthy of respect than is his / herself. Thus all managers are therefore

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<sup>6</sup> This is because they have, through their positions within organisations, power to affect the behaviour of others which is not available to the average person. This power is what makes possible the psychotic behaviour described by Sievers (1994).

<sup>7</sup> This is an extension of the conspicuous consumption thesis (Veblen 1899) whereby the consumption of the respect of others gives one status in proportion to the importance of others because of the ascribed cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) thereby acquired. Thus the more important the person who gives respect the greater one's self esteem is bolstered.

seeking to compare themselves favourably with the other managers in other organisations, who are always deemed more worthy. One way to attract this respect is to surround oneself with the material trappings of success. As far as the manager in the organisation is concerned this can be interpreted as such things as salaries and bonuses, share options, cars, chauffeurs and company planes. Another way to achieve this favourable comparison however is to earn the respect of the owners of the business, in other words the shareholders – or more specifically the respect of the major shareholders, City analysts and investors. The annual report provides a mechanism for earning this respect of others through the creation of the appropriate semiotic. This semiotic is of course one of success – but more particularly of success at a particularly difficult task. A dichotomy in the management of performance along two incompatible dimensions of performance enhances the perceived difficulty of the job of managing the organisation and hence provides a reason for the creation of the dialectic of corporate performance.

Since the development of psychoanalysis by Freud, critiques of this theory have been prevalent in the discourses of social theory and of Marxism. Indeed the intertwining of Marxist and Freudian theory as a means of understanding organisational behaviour and the distribution of power within society is a recurrent theme within many discourses. Thus for example Marcuse (1956) argues that rather than the foundations of civilisation being built upon the subjugation of human instincts in the assuagement of guilt it is instead built upon the way in which power is distributed and the consequent suppression of labour. Similarly Habermas (1971: 219) argues that Freudian psychoanalysis is based upon the voluntary self-deception of individuals as part of their anxiety reducing mechanisms, stating:

'The ongoing text of our everyday language games (speech and actions) is disturbed by apparently contingent mistakes: by omissions and distortions that can be discounted as accidents and ignored, as long as they fall within the conventional limits of tolerance.'

Habermas (1971: 282) continues this analysis by applying this criticism not just to individuals but also to organisations and argues that institutions, including corporate organisations, are involved in this deception, of themselves and others, when he states:

'Freud comprehends institutions as a power that has exchanged acute external force for the permanent internal compulsion of distorted and self limiting communications. Correspondingly he understands cultural tradition as the collective unconscious, censured in varying measure and turned outwards, where motives that have been split off from communication are driven incessantly about and are directed by the excluded symbols into channels of substitute gratification.'

Equally Baudrillard (1993, 1999: 138-9) is critical of psychoanalysis when he states:

'For it is from psychoanalysis (though not only from it, of course) that this inconceivable hallucination of the individual about his own desire proceeds..... it is psychoanalysis which, at the end of the "psychological revolution" of the nineteenth century, succeeded in this mad substitution of an individual psychic economy, of a libido, of one's own desire, and the Oedipal reversals of this desire at the event come from elsewhere, for the initiatory, seductive, and fatal incidence of the other as an event without precedent, for the surprise, for the coincidence of the world and the signs that make you not a subject but a preferred object of election and seduction.'

Possibly the most significant critique of psychoanalysis has been undertaken by Lacan who developed an alternative interpretation of Freudian theory which has permeated popular culture, while at the same time providing a basis for an understanding of the role of managers as individuals in the development of the semiology of corporate reporting. Lacanian interpretations incorporate both structuralist and post-structuralist arguments to extend the value of Freudian theory. Its limitations from this perspective can be encapsulated in the work of Harris (1979) who stated that the Freudian attempts to understand pan-human



psychodynamic processes were sufficient to understand and explain the similarities but not the differences in such processes.

Lacan argues that the formation of the ego is concerned with a fascination with one's own image. For him the external world merely represents a mirror upon which the self is displayed and the concern of the individual is to create a reflection in this mirror. This reflection must of course support that person's desire to see the most flattering reflection, but in such a way that it appears as reality. This is brought about by every person's inherent insecurity and seeking for the ideal self (Lacan 1977, 1988, 1991) and thus every action which a person undertakes is derived from this motivation. It is accepted however that this motivation may not be overt and may not even be recognised by the individual him/herself. Like Freud therefore, Lacan accepts that an individual's motivation may not be transparent even to him / herself but nevertheless that motivation becomes inseparable from the actions undertaken, and those actions have a motivation which is based upon the seeking of personal individuation.

This motivation applies to every individual but some, almost inevitably, have more scope for playing out their individuation drive upon the mirror of the world. In this respect the managers of any organisation have a large mirror to act upon, with this mirror being the organisation which they can shape, either consciously or unconsciously to their needs. This argument leads inevitably to the statement that it is impossible to separate the individual from the semiotic created by that individual. This therefore partially negates the Derridan argument concerning the irrelevance of the author in the interpretation of the semiotic and consequently reinstates that author in the semiotic. Thus the author of the corporate reporting script is attempting through the creation of that script to represent him / herself to the external world and to make that representation reflect him / herself as (s)he would wish to appear. That wish is of course to appear as a highly competent and capable person and the more difficult the activity in which (s)he is perceived to be engaged the closer that image relates to the ideal self. Thus the creation of the dialectic in the management of corporate affairs, between managing financial performance and managing environmental performance, leads to an enhanced image of the author as a competent and capable person. If this image is accepted by the readers of the script then, because the author determines and perceives his / her identity from viewing it upon the mirror of the world, the author also can accept this image. Thus the creation of an appropriate semiotic is essential to the individuation process and to the creation of the desired self-image. This therefore provides an explanation of the desire to create such a dialectic in corporate reporting and a motivation for the creation of the semiotic in the manner suggested in this analysis.

Further understanding of the psychoanalytic motivation of managerial behaviour in the context of the creation of the dialectic inherent in corporate reporting can be derived from a consideration of the Jungian interpretation of behaviour. Although based initially upon the work of Freud, Jung deviated from this interpretation significantly by focusing his concentration upon the understanding of individual behaviour through an understanding of societal behaviour and through the development of his concept of the collective unconscious (Jung 1972). This determines the way in which all people act and, according to Jung, provides a way of acting which is universal in nature and is inherited by all individuals. This way of behaving has existed from time immemorial and can be seen equally in the myths of primitive society<sup>8</sup> and in the behaviour of individuals in present society.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Cambell (1949, 1972, 1993)

An essential part of the motivation provided by the collective unconscious is concerned with the drive for belonging to a society or to a group within that society. This is manifest in such features of society as tribalism, the concept of the nation state, and the existence of a multitude of diverse local groups. It also explains the need for identification with and belonging to the organisation by which one is employed, and this applies to all employees but in particular to the managers of an organisation, who are not only employees but also to a large extent lead and control that organisation. Thus these managers are not just members but rather leaders of the tribe, and hence have a more powerful role to play in forging the successful identity of the tribe. This belonging (to whatever group or groups one chooses to identify with) is an essential part of the constitution of an individual's sense of identity and is vital in an individual's search for meaning in life. This sense of belonging through identification is naturally enhanced if one can have a significant, and preferably an essential, role in the group to which one belongs. This essential role of course exists for the managers of an organisation as far as their need for being needed is concerned. Moreover such managers are in a position, through their ability to shape that organisation and its perception, to enhance their perception of need. One way to achieve this is through the creation of the semiotic of corporate reporting. This search for belonging and being needed is a part of every person's search for meaning in life.

This need for meaning and belonging is manifest in the mythopoeic imagination (Jung 1953, 1954) and one manifestation of this need leads to the need for the creation of myth (May 1991) and the constitution of self as hero (or saviour) within the group to which one belongs (Jung 1953, Campbell 1949). Again the managers of an organisation are in a unique position within the organisation to shape the organisation to satisfy their need in this respect. In its extreme manifestation within a group situation this need for myth creation and the constitution of oneself as hero leads to a situation of groupthink (Janis 1972) and the notion of invulnerability. At a lesser level of intensity it leads the managers of an organisation to both portray themselves to the outside world as essential to the well being of the organisation, and to believe this portrayal themselves. Jung (1912) explains:

'The primordial image, elsewhere also termed archetype, is always collective, i.e., it is at least common to entire peoples or epochs. In all probability the most important mythological motifs are common to all times and races...'

The managers of an organisation are of course not unique in having unconscious motivations driving their behaviour<sup>9</sup>. They are present in all of us and consequently form one of the underlying themes of individual existence and organisational behaviour (Mitroff 1983). The managers of an organisation are however unique in that their position within the organisation gives them the power to act out these motivations through the creation of the myth of their necessity. The creation of the corporate reporting script, for which they are also the authors, provides one mechanism for the creation and reinforcement of this myth of their necessity as individuals to the future of that organisation. This then is the real and underlying myth of corporate existence. This myth explains the corporate reporting procedures and practices as well as the corporate technologies of control and performance measurement. This can be explored through a consideration of the semiotic of corporate reporting in terms of the myth creation role of such corporate reporting. For the purposes of exploring this part of the semiotic the myth creation role is contrasted with the ritual role of such reporting in order to create the binary opposition inherent in this semiotic analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> see Bettelheim (1976).

## *The myth v ritual dialectic*

Corporate reporting has several purposes but one of them is the creation of certainty through its mythic role. This myth creation role has several aspects but one aspect is the creation of the myth of the unified whole. One of the purposes of the corporate report therefore is the creation of the myth of the unified culture of the actors on the semiotic stage – in other words the common cultural bond of identity between the authors of the script and the audience<sup>10</sup>. This is achieved by the creation of a symbolic order which is an autonomous order of reality independent of the things symbolised (Jenkins 1979). The myth itself is a symbolic form (Brandist 1997) which assumes a life of its own. As Cassirer (1955: 5-6) states the specificity of myth lies not in its content but rather in

‘the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is believed – as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed.’

Thus myth has the power to present a single viewpoint as directly expressive of the existence of the organisation, which consequently exists in the form presented in the annual report. The corporate report as myth therefore provides an authoritative discourse about the organisation, and as Bakhtin (1981: 342) states

‘The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused into it. The authoritative word is located in the distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher.’

Thus the corporate report replaces the organisation itself as the real through this power assumed from its myth creation role and the organisation becomes in the minds of both the readers and the authors (through the reflective quality of the readership) that which is presented through the corporate reporting mechanism. The concept of the corporate report can therefore be considered to have attained a life of its own through the resurrection of the myth of its origin and authenticity. It can therefore be considered to have attained hyperreality through becoming more real than reality (Baudrillard 1981).

In addition to the myth creation role of corporate reporting for the individual organisation, Campbell (1949) argues that all myths have an underlying commonality which transcends the individual myth. Thus as far as corporate reporting is concerned the common elements can be seen in the common format of such reporting, the common style and the use of common language – natural, accounting and non-linguistic – to provide a unified myth concerning corporate reporting as the authoritative discourse of organisational existence and activity<sup>11</sup>. Thus the history of organisations unfolds through this corporate reporting (Campbell 1976) but unfolds in a manner which is common to all organisations and can therefore be depicted as universal and immutable. This unfolding of history can be seen from the development of corporate reports over time (McKinstry 1996) but the mythical role of such reports ensures that, although the image of the organisation changes with the development of corporate reports (Preston, Wright & Young 1997), the image of the organisation remains immutably fixed in the present. Levi Strauss (1955) contends that myth is different from language and so the techniques used to analyse myth must be different from those used to analyse language.

<sup>10</sup> See Crowther, Cooper & Carter (2001) for a consideration of the symbiotic relationship between the actors on the water company stage.

<sup>11</sup> It is recognised of course that legislation and GAAP requires a considerable element of this commonality but it is argued that this is subsumed within the image creation requirements of corporate reporting.

This point is refuted however through the use of semiotic tools of analysis, which it is argued are equally appropriate to this study when considering the language used in corporate reporting and the myth creation role of such reporting.

The creation of the myth of organisational existence is an essential step along the road to the creation of the religion which binds the organisation together (Malinowski 1962) and this religion becomes manifest in the rituals of organisational behaviour which will be explored as the other pole of this binarism. Malinowski (1962: 119) defines this in the following terms:

‘What is then the fact of a myth? Briefly, that all the principal tenets of religious belief have a tendency to be spun out into concrete stories; in the second place, these stories are never merely accounts of what happened in the past. Every act of ritual, every artistic representation of religious subjects, in the worship of relics and sacred places in short, in all the visual signs of past sensational acts of grace every theme is revived. The events of the mythological past play also a leading part in moral conduct and social organisation.’

The creation of this religion however is important to the managers of the organisation because the acceptance of the organisational religion implies also an acceptance of the managers of the organisation as the priesthood of that religion. Thus this provides a mechanism whereby the managers of the organisation can become the priesthood of the organisational religion. This is the ultimate in individuation as the meaning of life becomes self evident through the reflection of the godhead upon the priesthood in the mirror of existence.

One further purpose of myth creation in this context is the reinforcement of organisation boundaries, and hence the restatement of organisational existence. It has already been argued that corporate reporting is essentially for external consumption and that the accounting of organisations, together with all other information systems of those organisations, is subverted within the text to this end. Corporate reporting for external consumption can be considered as a myth creation mechanism for the redefinition and reinforcement of organisational boundaries which are in reality obsolete for performance determining purposes. External reporting serves the function of providing a statement to the external world that the organisation exists as a discrete entity and the production of the annual report<sup>12</sup> actually is designed to fulfil this role. Moreover the design of the report is carefully considered to make a statement not just that the organisation exists but also to create an image of that organisation. Thus over time corporate reports have become more and more full of information, statements from the chairman and others, and pictures of organisational activities. These corporate reports have therefore become more of a symbolic representation of the organisation designed to give to the (by implication) ‘discerning’ reader the impression that this is an organisation to be interested in, with a dynamic present and an even more interesting future. The legal purpose of reporting past performance is almost irrelevant as the focus is upon the prospects for the future. These prospects are always suggested to be an improvement upon the present and this provides a means of signalling the importance of the organisation and of its existence.

Despite the assertions of Norris (1990), language creates reality which then becomes truth. Thus, as Barthes (1988) claims, meaning is not in the linguistic structure of a message but in the image created by the recipient of the message. Accounting by its nature creates an image of the organisation, the decision making within the organisation and the future of that organisation. This is achieved though the use of the language of accounting and the perceived

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<sup>12</sup> It is recognised that this reporting is actually required by law for all public limited companies, but argued that this reason has been relegated to insignificance.

certainty attached to that language. One of the purposes of such external reporting is to continually recreate the myth of organisational existence as certainty in the uncertain world. This certainty is of course a myth and one important function of accounting therefore is to act as a myth creation mechanism for the organisation as a statement of organisational existence as immutable.

One of the purposes of myth making is to remove temporality from the perception of the onlooker (Levi Strauss 1966), who in this case is an external consumer of the information supplied by the organisation. Removing temporality has the effect of conflating the past and present into the present and to make this present contiguous with the future. In doing so the uncertainty of images made through accounting, from one period to the next, is disguised within the omnipresent organisational myth based upon the eternal present. Rationality and predictability through using accounting information within the metanarrative myth of organisational immutability therefore seems reasonable within any discourse of organisational reporting. This removal of temporality has the concomitant effect of focusing upon spatiality. As far as spatiality is concerned the organisation seeks to create the myth of itself as omnipresent through the attention given to both the local and the global aspects of organisational existence. This is achieved through the use of appropriate text and image in the reporting.

Thus the myth of organisational existence is created by this means and this existence is continually recreated as atemporal and omnipresent, but also extremely local. In this manner synchronicity and diachronicity are conflated and subsumed within the myth. Likewise the past is removed in favour of the eternal present and better future as the organisation signals its existence and importance through this mythical role of corporate reporting.

This myth of organisation importance is naturally of concern to the authors of the text. If the organisation is important then, by implication, those managing the organisation, ie the authors of the script, must also be important. As Barthes (1988) claims, meaning is not in the linguistic structure of a message but in the image created by the recipient of the message. The form of corporate reports is designed, almost inevitably, to create an image of the importance and permanence of the organisation and hence of those managing that organisation. This therefore explains the increased dominance, not of accounting information, but of messages from members of the dominant coalition managing the organisation and particularly the chairman, managing director and increasingly other powerful members of the management team. This message is designed to indicate the need for the organisation to exist as a discrete entity, defined through the reinforcement of the organisational boundary and reinforced through the production of appropriately constructed corporate reports. At the same time such reports demonstrate just how necessary those members of the dominant coalition are to maintenance of the organisation and to its future. The language of the statements from these people tends therefore to be used as a device for corrupting thought (Orwell 1970) through being used as an instrument to prevent thought about the various alternative realities of the organisation's existence, in terms of the multiple representations of the organisation which are apparent through the use of the technology of accounting.

These realities imply that in a postmodern environment, if the organisational boundary is irrelevant, or even deleterious, to organisation performance, then so too are the managing team of that organisation. Therefore reporting to the external environment must be made to appear the most important function of accounting information, with other purposes made subservient to this need in order to demonstrate the need for the dominant coalition of senior

managers. Thus the myth of the organisation is extended to the authors of the script and their essential contribution to the success of the organisation (as indicated by the expensive product of that success, the corporate report) is made into reality (Barthes 1973). Accounting information therefore becomes a defensive instrument, not for the organisation, but for the senior management of the centre, and a means to retain power through using accounting to symbolise the necessity of their continued existence, with the whole control and use of accounting information and systems being directed towards this end.

In binary opposition to myth as far as corporate reporting is concerned is ritual. For an individual, ritual is an essential part of personality integration – a process of becoming whole (Perls 1975). Rituals therefore are steps along the way to completion of the whole<sup>13</sup>. So too for organisations are rituals steps to be completed along the way to wholeness. In the case of the organisation however the integration needed is not that of parts of the organisation but that of the various people involved in the organisation into a unified whole, based upon the rituals of organisational religion. This religion, of necessity, becomes institutionalised into the organisation and its culture and forms part of the way in which the organisation conducts itself both internally and in relating to its external environment<sup>14</sup>. As Bocoock (1974: 174) states:

‘Ritual action can have two sorts of consequences for the society in which it takes place: either it can provide a process whereby people become more attached to the basic way of life and values of the society, or to the major sub-groups within it of which the participants in ritual are a part, or ritual can lead to people making new demands on the way of life in their society, and a desire to see change both in action and in the values the society pursues.’

It is naturally not in the interests of the managers of the organisation, who seek to constitute themselves as the priesthood of the organisation, to allow the ritual actions of the organisation to lead to demands for changes. It therefore becomes imperative that the ritual role of corporate activity becomes subsumed within the myth creation role and this can be achieved through the institutionalisation of such ritual activity within the organisational religion.

One of the purposes of such ritual behaviour is to remove spaciality from the discourse of organisational activity and to focus attention upon the temporal dimension. Thus organisational existence is legitimated in this manner as a temporal sequence proceeding from one rite of organisational existence to the next in a smooth flow of routinised ritual activity. The use of accounting information in such a ritual way serves the purpose of an organisational religion and, when used in this way, is essentially inward looking for internal consumption. The rituals, for maximal effectiveness also need to encompass external stakeholders and the corporate reporting ritual serves in this way<sup>15</sup>. This reporting ritual serves to both include these external stakeholders, as audience of the script, within the rituals of organisational religion as worshippers of the organisational deity and its priesthood and simultaneously to distance this priesthood from its acolytes, both internal (ie employees) and external (ie the audience on the semiotic stage<sup>16</sup>).

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<sup>13</sup> These can be considered to be the rites of passage (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle 1997) which mark the way to that wholeness.

<sup>14</sup> This institutionalisation of religion becomes part of the culture of the organisation and socialises the individual who assimilates the cultural givens of the organisation (Dollimore 1984).

<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of the press in the reporting rituals of the organisation also serves to include the press into the religious activities of the organisation while at the same time seeking to use them as acolytes in the mediation and promotion of the corporate message.

<sup>16</sup> See Crowther 2002.

Thus in the corporate reports the authors both signal that the organisation is moving forwards to better times, in the manner previously outlined, but also signal themselves as the priesthood and the audience as acolytes. This is achieved through the language of the report which clearly sends the message that the authors of the report are the decision makers for the organisation. At the same time it signals that their knowledge enables them to make the best decisions on behalf of the other stakeholders, who merely worship from afar and accept the received wisdom of the priesthood.

The role of the audience is merely that of worship from afar through approval of the actions taken by the priesthood and to anticipate salvation in the future. The shareholder community however have one additional rite to perform which is to approve the actions of the priesthood and reaffirm their worship. For this additional rite they are rewarded by the priesthood, acting on behalf of the deity, in a manner determined by that priesthood – that is by the receipt of their annual dividend.

### *The Mythic Stage*

The understanding of the semiotic of corporate reporting in this manner is of importance as it allows the consideration of the relationship between the audience and the authors of the script<sup>17</sup> to be explored. From the analysis undertaken it can be seen that there is in fact a dialogue going on between these parties who are all in fact actors on the semiotic stage, albeit performing different roles<sup>18</sup>. It is equally clear however that the authors of the script are also acting as directors of the play taking place on the stage and are seeking to control the way in which the other actors perform their parts. The other actors have essentially supporting roles in approving the script and admiring its authors. Occasionally however these other actors have cameo roles in a starring part such as, for example, when the shareholders are called to the centre of the stage to approve the actions of the authors and at the same time approve and accept their rewards for good performance<sup>19</sup>. The authors of the script are of course, as previously identified, the dominant coalition of management who control not just the script of corporate reporting but also the activities of the company whose performance determines the corporate report. This leads to a consideration of the role of such managers in both managing the organisation and in managing the text of the reporting procedures.

It now becomes necessary to consider the purpose for corporate reporting being constituted in such a manner. This is necessary in order to draw some conclusions out of the analysis and to consider the applicability of those conclusions in a general business context. This is the subject matter of this section and these considerations bring out the central question which has yet to be addressed. This question concerns the role of the dominant coalition, which has been argued to be management, in any organisation in the determination of performance and the reporting upon that performance.

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<sup>17</sup> See the semiotic stage developed by Crowther 2002..

<sup>18</sup> See also Crowther, Cooper & Carter (2001).

<sup>19</sup> These rewards, in the form of dividends, are of course recommended by the managers and the role of the shareholders is merely to approve this recommendation. It is interesting that the rewards of the dominant coalition are not approved by the shareholders (despite their being employees of the shareholders) but recommended through other mechanisms – thereby indicating where the real power lies within an organisation. It also leads to unwanted press mediation when the press comment upon the excessive pay awarded to directors.

Agency theory argues that managers merely act as custodians of the organisation and its operational activities<sup>20</sup> and places upon them the burden of managing in the best interest of the owners of that business<sup>21</sup>. According to agency theory all other stakeholders of the business are largely irrelevant and if they benefit from the business then this is coincidental to the activities of management in running the business to serve shareholders<sup>22</sup>. This focus upon shareholders alone as the intended beneficiaries of a business has been questioned considerably from many perspectives, which argue that it is either not the way in which a business is actually run or that it is a view which does not meet the needs of society in general. Conversely stakeholder theory argues that there are a whole variety of stakeholders involved in the organisation and each deserves some return for their involvement. According to stakeholder theory therefore benefit is maximised if the business is operated by its management on behalf of all stakeholders and returns are divided appropriately amongst those stakeholders, in some way which is acceptable to all. Unfortunately a mechanism for dividing returns amongst all stakeholders<sup>23</sup> which has universal acceptance does not exist, and stakeholder theory is significantly lacking in suggestions in this respect. Nevertheless this theory has some acceptance and is based upon the premise that operating a business in this manner achieves as one of its outcomes the maximisation of returns to shareholders, as part of the process of maximising returns to all other stakeholders. This maximisation of returns is achieved in the long run through the optimisation of performance for the business to achieve maximal returns to all stakeholders<sup>24</sup>. Consequently the role of management is to optimise the long term performance of the business in order to achieve this end and thereby reward all stakeholders, including themselves as one stakeholder community, appropriately.

These two theories can be regarded as competing explanations of the operations of a firm which lead to different operational foci and to different implications for the measurement and reporting of performance. It is significant however that both theories have one feature in common. This is that the management of the firm is believed to be acting on behalf of others, either shareholders or stakeholders more generally. They do so, not because they are the kind of people who behave altruistically, but because they are rewarded appropriately and much effort is therefore devoted to the creation of reward schemes which motivate these managers to achieve the desired ends. Similarly much literature is devoted to the consideration of the effects of reward schemes on managerial behaviour (see for example Briers & Hirst 1990, Child 1974, 1975, Coates et al 1993, Fitzgerald et al 1991) and suggestion for improvements.

In this paper a different approach is taken and it is argued that the role of management in shaping the organisation, determining its performance, and reporting upon that performance is much more central to an understanding of organisational behaviour than is a study of managerial reward schemes. Furthermore the reasons why this might be so are considered, along with their implications for understanding organisational behaviour.

### **Corporate reporting – the question of audience segregation**

It has been argued that one of the aims of corporate reporting is to bring about a segregation of the audience for such reports in order to systematically raise the importance of various

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Emmanuel, Otley & Merchant (1985).

<sup>21</sup> Such owners are of course the legal owners of the business, that is the shareholders.

<sup>22</sup> See the VBM discourse considered by Cooper et al 2001.

<sup>23</sup> See for example the discourse surrounding social accounting considered in chapter 3, and the problems of actually measuring the benefit to be distributed.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Rappaport (1986, 1992).



poles in the binary oppositions by Crowther (2002), and as a corollary lower the importance of the opposite poles. Thus focusing upon environmental performance and financial performance separately in separate parts of the script, the annual report and the environmental report, is part of the mechanism of achieving this end. It has been argued (Crowther 2002) that different parts of the script are intended by the authors to semiotically interact with different sections of the audience and to create an image of the organisation which would appeal to that part of the audience. In other words this requires the creation of multiple images of the organisation within the same text such that each person can construct from the text the most appealing image of the organisation for his / her needs and perspective<sup>25</sup>. This is part of the myth creation role of organisational reporting which will be returned to later. This approach will only work of course if it is possible to segregate the script so that different parts of the script are read by different parts of the audience. Moreover it is also necessary to segregate the audience appropriately so that the right part of the script is read by the right part of the audience. Both of these two requirements are problematical.

It has been identified that the script can be separated into an environmental script and a financial script and this approach has been taken by an increasing number of companies. In the UK now the majority of companies produce an environmental report. These environmental reports details and images of social and environmental performance and activity but no reference to financial performance. The only financial information contained in these reports relates to the spending on environmental improvement activities. Financial information is contained in the annual report (which contains the statutory reporting requirements), together with information believed to be of interest to financial stakeholders, such as shareholders and other investors and analysts. Indeed Unilever, for example, has recognised that the statutory reporting requirements are incidental to the purpose of the annual report and have therefore segregated their script further through the production of two documents – the Annual Review and the Annual Accounts<sup>26</sup>.

All of the companies however recognise that total segregation of the audience is not possible and include reference to environmental matters in their annual report while excluding any quantitative evaluation of environmental performance. The annual report is sent as a matter of course to all shareholders<sup>27</sup> as part of the ritual element of the corporate religion and to all other interested parties. The environmental report is however made available but not sent to any part of the audience as a matter of course. Thus the shareholders are an essential part of the audience, for religious purposes as well as statutory purposes, and their interaction with the script is of importance to the authors. It is mainly however the large, and hence most powerful, shareholders (primarily the investment institutions) which are of importance to the authors of the script, together with the analysts<sup>28</sup> who are believed to influence those shareholders. Thus companies such as Severn Trent have declared to all shareholders that they will only be given the statutory minimum of a summary financial statement, unless they explicitly declare their requirement otherwise. This seems to be an attempt to clear the

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<sup>25</sup> See Habermas (1971). The separation of the report is designed to assist this individual semiotic creation to coincide with that desired by the authors of the script.

<sup>26</sup> Other companies, such as for example Pilkington, also separate their report in this manner.

<sup>27</sup> Except when this annual report has itself been replaced by a summary report. Such summary reports are becoming increasingly common and can be argued to represent the latest development in the managerial assumption of primacy – to such an extent that they do not even feel required to report upon their actions in detail. An alternative interpretation however is that the production of such summary reports represents the relegation of the small shareholder to insignificant disdain and removal from the discourse.

<sup>28</sup> And the financial press.

semiotic stage of the insignificant supporting cast and enable the authors to interact with the most powerful parts of the audience.

It has been previously argued<sup>29</sup>, in the context of a consideration of the stakeholders of the organisation and their respective perspectives upon organisational performance, that an individual is likely to belong to more than one stakeholder community and hence have more than one perspective upon organisational performance. Thus an individual may well be a shareholder, a customer and a member of the local spatial community surrounding an operational site of the organisation, and will certainly also be a member of society at large. As such this person will have different perspectives upon the performance of the organisation and will be interested in both environmental performance and financial performance as well as the short term performance and the longer term performance of the organisation from both these perspectives. This makes audience segregation problematical unless it can be arranged that each person will read the script only from a single perspective at any particular time and will fail to integrate the images extracted from these different perspectives – a highly unlikely situation. It also demonstrates that, despite the best efforts of the authors to segregate the script, it remains in fact one complete script<sup>30</sup> accessible to all. This problem of audience segregation is particularly problematical when the company is one which deals with individuals as consumers of its products. The consumers of their corporate script are by definition multiple stakeholders – societally, as customers, possibly also territorially through their domicile, and as shareholders.

It is therefore argued that audience segregation is impossible for purposes of reading different parts of the script, and any attempt to do so is destined for failure. The criticism received by companies for benefiting shareholders at the expense of customers provides evidence in support of this impossibility. The question therefore arises as to whether or not there is a need to segregate the script and what benefits might arise from so doing. A semiotic analysis suggests that there must be a strong motivation for the authors of the script to attempt this task of segregation given the impossibility of any complete form of audience segregation. Instead such segregation is based around the need to segregate the two aspects of performance – the internal traditional accounting perspective and the external societal perspective – rather than the need to separate the audience.

This separation can therefore be considered to be a dialectic<sup>31</sup> which is created by the authors of the script for their own purposes and the exploration of the meaning and purpose of this dialectic becomes important to the understanding of corporate reporting and of managerial behaviour<sup>32</sup>. The semiology of corporate reporting is designed to reinforce the impression that

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<sup>29</sup> See Crowther 2002.

<sup>30</sup> At least it remains potentially one single script for those who choose to read it in this manner.

<sup>31</sup> It has been argued that this dialectic does not actually exist but is considered here due to the managerial motivations for retaining the appearance of this dialectic.

<sup>32</sup> This dialectic is considered in terms of a Hegelian dialectic comprising of thesis and antithesis. This dialectic but can be summarised again in terms of corporate reporting, as follows:

- the universality of using accounting information to communicate corporate performance to the external world through the corporate reports produce, by the means of treating the organisation as an entity
- the particularities of
  - the internal perspective of reporting corporate performance through the use of traditional accounting measures focusing upon the effect of the activities of the organisation upon itself alone
  - the external perspective of corporate reporting upon the organisation and its environment through the use of social and environmental measures of performance and subsequent reporting

In this way the performance reporting dialectic is created based upon the following:

thesis

these two dimensions of performance<sup>33</sup> are incompatible and that good performance in one dimension necessitates poor performance in the other. The semiotic created by the authors of the corporate reporting script is based upon this implicit assumption of incompatibility. In this respect the authors of the script need to ensure that this dialectic is created and maintained.

It has been argued that this dialectic does not in reality exist and must therefore be created in the minds of the readers of the corporate reporting script. It has also been argued that this creation of the dialectic also creates the reality of the dialectic in the minds of the authors of the script<sup>34</sup>. It is by this means therefore that the dialectic is brought into existence and becomes real because it is believed to be real – belief and reality becoming thereby inseparable. In considering the semiotic of corporate reporting the following factors are pertinent:

- the authors hold centre stage and construct the script as they wish in an attempt to create the desired image
- audience segregation, although problematical, is essential for the maintenance of the dialectic
- myth creation, rather than performance reporting, is the principle role of the text
- facts are subordinated to images, and reported in a different way to different parts of the audience
- dialogue is more imagined by the authors than real.

In maintaining the dialectic of the difference between financial performance and social performance the authors of the script need to make use of a variety of techniques to continually reinforce the existence of the dialectic. The following techniques, which have been considered in the preceding analysis, can be seen to exist:

- audience segregation is maintained through separate financial and environmental reporting in separate documents
- appropriate activities and measures are selected for reporting to the different audience, making direct comparison problematical for the readers
- the same activity is reported differently to the different audiences as part of the semiotic
- mediation through the press is attempted for image reinforcement
- non-linguistic devices are used extensively for image building.

It has been argued that audience segregation is impossible for purposes of reading different parts of the script, and any attempt to do so is destined for failure. The question therefore arises as to whether or not there is actually a need to segregate the script and what benefits might arise from so doing<sup>35</sup>. One synthesis which could be argued is the integration of the

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the traditional use of accounting, which focuses upon the organisational perspective on performance and is concerned solely with the activities of the organisation and the internal value thereby created should be the focus of managerial attention and is sufficient explanation of organisational activity  
antithesis

the societal perspective focuses upon the effects of the activities of the organisation upon the external environment and requires a different focus of managerial attention

Although the existence of a Hegelian dialectic, which would be resolved through history, has been rejected in favour of a Kantian approach it is important to remember this historical flow.

<sup>33</sup> The internal traditional accounting perspective and the external societal perspective.

<sup>34</sup> See Fish (1985).

<sup>35</sup> Crowther (2002) provides evidence that companies which perform well financially also perform well societally and environmentally. This in itself suggests that there is no need to segregate environmental performance from financial performance. Indeed it rather suggests the opposite in that the two sets of

different perspectives upon performance into one unified performance measurement and reporting system, embodied in a unified corporate annual report. Plainly this is not the case as far as the measurement and reporting of performance is concerned in actuality, and it has been argued that the managers of these organisations, as authors of the corporate reporting script, actually have a need to create and maintain the dialectic between the different dimensions of performance. It therefore becomes necessary to seek another synthesis as a means of integrating the dialectic. This synthesis is in terms of the motivation for the behaviour of the authors of the corporate reporting script themselves, which explains their behaviour in maintaining the dialectic.

### **The conflation of financial and environmental performance**

One view of good environmental performance is that of stewardship and thus just as the management of an organisation is concerned with the stewardship of the financial resources of the organisation so too would management of the organisation be concerned with the stewardship of environmental resources. The difference however is that environmental resources are mostly located externally to the organisation. Stewardship in this context therefore is concerned with the resources of society as well as the resources of the organisation. As far as stewardship of external environmental resources is concerned then the central tenet of such stewardship is that of ensuring sustainability. Sustainability is focused on the future and is concerned with ensuring that the choices of resource utilisation in the future are not constrained by decisions taken in the present. This necessarily implies such concepts as generating and utilising renewable resources, minimising pollution and using new techniques of manufacture and distribution. It also implies the acceptance of any costs involved in the present as an investment for the future.

Not only does such sustainable activity however impact upon society in the future; it also impacts upon the organisation itself in the future. Thus good environmental performance by an organisation in the present is in reality an investment in the future of the organisation itself. This is achieved through the ensuring of supplies and production techniques which will enable the organisation to operate in the future in a similar way to its operations in the present and so to undertake value creation activity in the future much as it does in the present. Financial management also however is concerned with the management of the organisation's resources in the present so that management will be possible in a value creation way in the future. Thus the internal management of the firm, from a financial perspective, and its external environmental management coincide in this common concern for management for the future. Good performance in the financial dimension leads to good future performance in the environmental dimension and vice versa. Thus there is no dichotomy between environmental performance and financial performance and the two concepts conflate into one concern. This concern is of course the management of the future as far as the firm is concerned<sup>36</sup>. The role of social and environmental accounting and reporting and the role financial accounting and reporting therefore can be seen to be coincidental. Thus the work required needs be concerned not with arguments about resource distribution but rather with the development of measures which truly reflect the activities of the organisation upon its environment. These techniques of measurement, and consequently of reporting, are a necessary precursor to the concern with the management for the future.

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performance should be integrated as this will enhance the script for the whole audience and improve the image of the company created by so doing.

<sup>36</sup> Financial reporting is of course premised upon the continuing of the company – the going concern principle.

Similarly the creation of value within the firm is followed by the distribution of value to the stakeholders of that firm, whether these stakeholders are shareholders or others. Value however must be taken in its widest definition to include more than economic value as it is possible that economic value can be created at the expense of other constituent components of welfare such as spiritual or emotional welfare<sup>37</sup>. This creation of value by the firm adds to welfare for society at large, although this welfare is targeted at particular members of society rather than treating all as equals. This has led to arguments by Tinker (1988), Herremans et al (1992) and Gray (1992), amongst others, concerning the distribution of value created and to whether value is created for one set of stakeholders at the expense of others. Nevertheless if, when summed, value is created then this adds to welfare for society at large, however distributed. Similarly good environmental performance leads to increased welfare for society at large, although this will tend to be expressed in emotional and community terms rather than being capable of being expressed in quantitative terms. This will be expressed in a feeling of wellbeing, which will of course lead to increased motivation. Such increased motivation will inevitably lead to increased productivity, some of which will benefit the organisations, and also a desire to maintain the pleasant environment which will in turn lead to a further enhanced environment, a further increase in welfare and the reduction of destructive aspects of societal engagement by individuals.

Thus increased welfare leads to its own self-perpetuation. In the context of welfare also therefore financial performance and environmental performance conflate into a general concern with an increase in welfare. It is therefore argued that environmental performance and financial performance are not different dimensions of performance which must inevitably be in opposition to each other. Rather they are both facets of the same dimension of concern for the future. The conflation of financial performance and environmental performance into the same concept does not of course mean that environmental accounting becomes irrelevant. Rather it raises the profile of such accounting and places it at the centre of organisational accounting alongside management accounting. Furthermore it means that more work is needed to develop the embryonic concepts of environmental accounting and make the quantification of environmental effect more effective and meaningful and comparative. Thus it becomes apparent that more work is needed in the area of environmental accounting but moreover it becomes apparent that this is work which is vital for the understanding of corporate performance and the future of that performance. Thus environmental accounting and performance must inevitably become the concern of corporate management.

It has been argued however that, despite the conflation of environmental and financial performance, the two have been divorced as far as the myth of the organisation, as reflected in its reporting, is concerned. If this argument is accepted it is therefore necessary to consider why the two are perceived to be in opposition to each other and presented in this way. This leads to the central question of the role of management in controlling and reporting upon performance.

### **The mediation of management**

It is argued that the dominant coalition of managers at the centre of an organisation, called for the sake of simplicity management, are the authors of the script which becomes the corporate

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Mishan (1967), Ormerod (1994) and Crowther, Davies & Cooper (1998). This can be equated to the concept of utility from the discourse of classical liberalism.

report. Thus as authors they shape that script and decide its contents<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore they determine the image of the organisation which they wish to be portrayed to the readers of the script. They are then able to operationalise the production of that image through the corporate reporting mechanisms which are instituted within the organisation and through determining the format of the report actually produced. The purported nature of that corporate report is to inform shareholders, and other interested parties (who are thereby considered to be readers of the script and consequently stakeholders to the corporate reporting process), of the actions which have been taken by management in the preceding period on behalf of the shareholders, and the outcomes of those actions in terms of performance. But the actual purpose of the report is much more than that. Indeed it is argued that reporting upon past performance is almost irrelevant and is certainly inconsequential as far as such corporate reporting is concerned. Such reporting would require a past focus in the corporate report and, although reference is made to the past, not just for statutory reporting purposes, this is set in the context of the implications of that past for the future of the organisation.

Instead the report is intended to be forward looking and to signal to the readers of the script that the future will be an improvement on the present. Indeed it is argued that the past has continually been dismissed as almost an irrelevance and certainly no basis for judgement concerning the future. Instead the future will be an improvement upon that past and this improved future will be brought about by the skills of the management team, who best know how to manage the resources of the business. Management also demonstrates the power to reconstitute itself without reference to the owners of the business. This reinforces the argument made earlier that reference to the past has no place in determining the future of the organisation. Instead the future is all that matters. If management truly believed that they acted as agents for others, either shareholders exclusively or a combination of stakeholders, then the admissions of failure which are commonly made, as incidentals in the script, would cause them to tender their resignations or at the very least seek reaffirmation of their role in managing the organisation. This behaviour therefore provides one clue in the consideration of the role of management in any organisation.

In this respect therefore the managers of the organisation act as determinants of the religion of the organisation, as constituted through the rituals embedded into organisational behaviour. They can therefore be likened to the priesthood because of the central role which they play in determining the religious functions to be performed. Thus, in the context of atemporal continuity, the priesthood of the organisation is able to determine its own succession and perform the appropriate initiation rites into its select body. Some new priests have however already been initiated into priesthood in other organisations and the transition is therefore relatively simple.

Part of the myth creation role of corporate reporting is designed to foster the myth that managing an organisation is a difficult task which requires a unique set of skills which few people possess. Fortunately for the future of any particular organisation, the management of that organisation are in possession of this unique set of skills, and the semiotic is intended to create this image. This message is evident in all corporate reports but the poorer is the reported performance the more is the need to emphasise the possession of these skills.

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<sup>38</sup> It is recognised that this work involves the contributions of others both internal to the organisation (eg accountants) and external (eg publishing experts). The guiding force is however the dominant coalition who act as editors of the script.

Thus the message is reinforced that management of a business is complex but the particular management of the particular organisation have the requisite skills and ability to manage such a difficult operation; moreover they are foresighted enough to have strategies in place which will show just rewards in the future. Such statements can be found throughout the landscape of corporate reporting. This then provides a clue as to the reason for the reports giving the message that environmental performance and financial performance are incompatible and that one must trade off with the other, despite the argument above that the two conflate into a common concern. The reason for the image of incompatibility is in the myth creation role of corporate reporting and the need to continually create and recreate afresh the myth of the organisation and its religion, and to reaffirm the role of the priesthood in the organisation.

Thus the corporate myth is intended not just to portray the organisation as atemporal and omnipresent but it is also designed to affirm the priesthood in power. This is achieved through the creation of the rituals of organisational religion already referred to but also by means of creating an image of the difficulty of managing the organisation so that it becomes apparent that only the priesthood have the necessary skills to achieve this management. The more difficult this task appears to be the more apparent it becomes that the task needs to be delegated to those with the necessary skills – the current management team as portrayed through the semiotic. Thus managing the conflicting and oppositional demands of financial and environmental performance becomes one additional burden which the priesthood must bear on behalf of the owners of the business and this provides a motivation for the segregation of the script into its environmental and financial constituents. Naturally the shareholders will be expected to demonstrate their gratitude to the priesthood for assuming this additional burden and the rewards of management for their efforts will need to be commensurate with their burden.

It has previously been argued<sup>d</sup> that the purpose of corporate reporting is to continually create and recreate the myth of organisational existence. This myth involves the audience in its enactment through their interaction with the script and its authors, as has previously been analysed. While this myth creation role is an important part of corporate reporting, this myth is but one step along the road to the creation of the myth in which resides the real purpose of corporate reporting. This myth is the myth of the priesthood and its uniqueness and irreplaceability. It is this myth which binds together the organisation and its operational infrastructure and explains the relationship between the internal technologies of the organisation, its performance measurement systems and its external reporting. This myth therefore needs exploring in greater detail.

### *The myth which binds*

It must be remembered however that managers are not only the authors of the script but are also part of the audience, not only as managers but also as other stakeholders. Thus one way in which the other stakeholders interact with the script and its authors is through the managers themselves acting as representatives of those other stakeholders. Thus managers are able to interpret the response of those other stakeholders to their own actions by considering their own responses. This gives the motivation and means to legitimate their actions, as managers, being undertaken on behalf of the other stakeholders to the organisation. Legitimation of activity in this way, by means of self-referential discourse, is of course dangerous and can lead to self delusion. The fact that such discourse is unquestioned among the rest of the audience however supports the validity of legitimation in such a manner.

Thus although the semiotic stage of corporate reporting is set as an interaction between the audience, the script and the authors (Crowther 2002), the real stage upon which the script is acted out is however somewhat different. This stage is described as the Mythic Stage. On this stage the frame is atemporal but the action is linear.

Thus on this stage the authors create the corporate reporting script which in turn creates the myth of organisational existence. This myth of organisational existence creates in the minds of its readers the notional of atemporality but also of a better future because of the priesthood. This in turn creates the myth of the godhead. This second myth, that of the godhead, is the real purpose of the creation of the dialectic of corporate reporting. Through the creation of this myth the authors of the script are enabled to achieve individuation through their self-belief in their own essentiality to the myth of organisational existence. This is achieved through the creation of the semiotic which presents the managers of the organisation as essential to the future of the organisation. This therefore enables the managers themselves to believe this desire on behalf of the stakeholders to the organisation to secure the desirable improved future, which is of course dependant upon the managers of the organisation remaining as managers. Thus the Mythic Stage can be depicted thus:

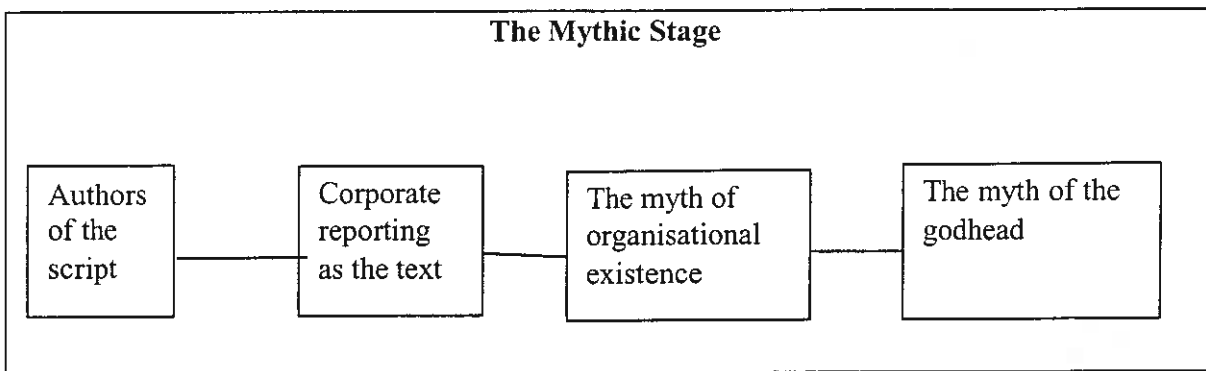


Fig 1 – The Mythic Stage

Upon this stage the audience is not involved in any interaction but nevertheless have an important part to play. Their part is that of affirmation of the myths and, through this affirmation, worship of the godhead. Thus the myths continue to be created in atemporal continuity (Berger 1974, Horne 1986). For this affirmation to take place it is of course necessary that the audience accept the myths as reality and so the text of the corporate report is designed to create the necessary images of the organisation to ensure this acceptance, and this takes place in the manner previously considered. It is also necessary that the motivations of the audience as individuals are recognised and thus the semiotics of the reporting suggests through appropriate images of interaction and that the audience has an actual part to play in the unfolding of the script. This semiotic of interaction, and the concomitant creation of the binarisms in the script is necessary to the maintenance of the myth of organisational existence which is in turn necessary to the myth of the godhead. Thus the audience is included in the community of the organisation as a part of the organisation and the horizon is ringed by the unifying myth of organisational existence (Nietsche 1956).

In return for their acceptance of the myths and their worship of the godhead the audience is presented with rewards which are great in the present but are promised to be even greater in the future. These rewards are partly financial, in the form of increased value of their investment and dividends, partly in terms of welfare through the knowledge that the



organisation is responsible in terms of its interaction with the environment, and partly in terms of self esteem through the knowledge of inclusion in the wonderful, well managed community of the organisation. Thus the full Mythic Stage can be represented thus:

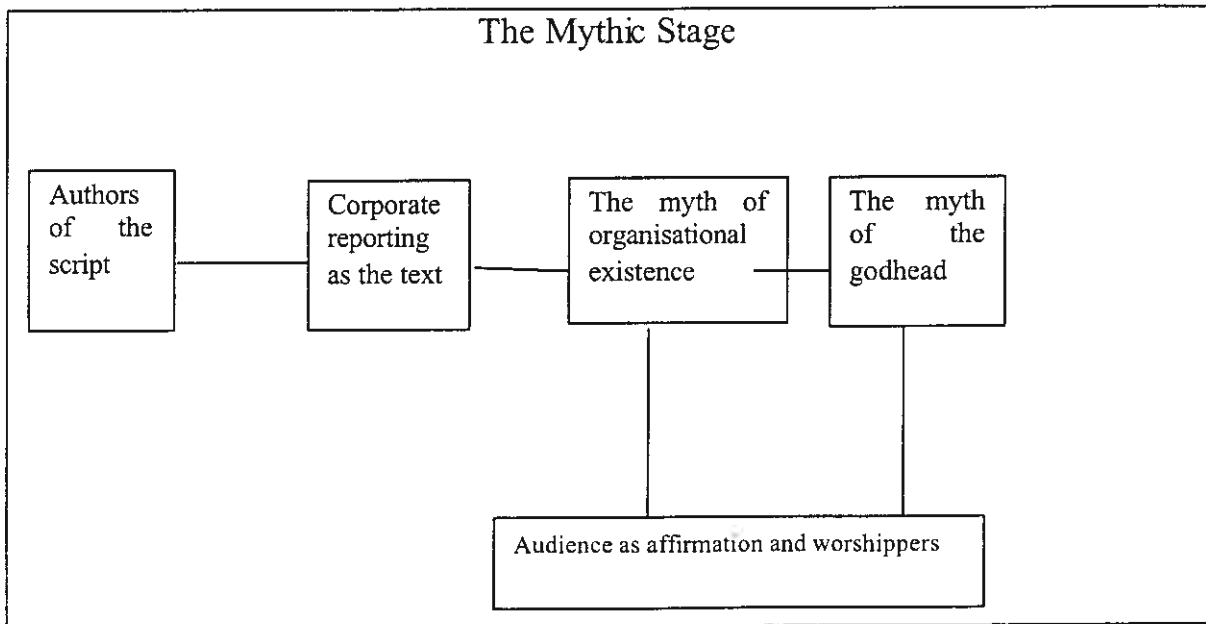


Fig 2 – The Full Mythic Stage

On this stage the shareholders of the organisation have been relegated from the central role of ownership of the business, with the consequent power to delegate or withhold the power of management of the business to others, to a peripheral role of investing in the business and affirming the role of the managers in leading the business into the future. Thus the managers are able to declare to these shareholders that changes have been made, even to the constitution of that management itself, in the manner already described, without the need to refer such matters to them as the owners of the business. Their role as mere investors is to affirm the action already taken through their engagement in one of the principle rituals of organisational religion, the Annual General Meeting. Even in this ritual the role of these investors is merely to affirm the actions and wishes of the priesthood. Thus in some of the annual reports the order of service for this ritual is presented as predetermined and consists firstly of the need for affirmation of the actions of the priesthood.

Thus the first items on the order of service (ie the Agenda) always include:

- To receive the accounts and reports of directors
- To declare a dividend
- To re-elect or confirm the appointment of directors.

Although the form of the AGM is legally prescribed, the essential feature of this view of the meeting as a religious rite is that it is assumed that the appropriate responses, as prescribed in the religious rites, will automatically follow in the form of affirmation by the audience as worshippers of the organisational religion. The receipt of this affirmation is so taken for granted that the necessary actions have already been implemented.

The acceptance of the existence of this Mythic Stage upon which the play is performed provides an explanation of corporate reporting and the way in which such reporting is structured. Such acceptance need not however be judgmental as it does not mean that its existence is either good or bad, as there is no need for any such polarisation. It merely provides a semiotic of corporate reporting.

## Conclusion

According to Campbell (1972: 245):

'The function of ritual is to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth. In ancient times every social occasion was ritually structured and the sense of depth was rendered through the maintenance of a religious tone. Today, on the other hand, the religious tone is reserved for exceptional, very special 'sacred' occasions.'

In this paper however it has been argued that that religious tone has been maintained, but in a context which most would identify as a secular context. Of more interest however, in the context of this paper, is the way in which epic stories have changed their origins and functions in modern society. Instead of uniting society they have now been usurped for the dividing of society and privileging some at the expense of others. This of course has always been the function of religion and the new religion, of managerial supremacy, has appropriated the concepts of the myth and the epic story to promote their hegemony.

Previously epics stories have recounted the adventures of the hero who acquires knowledge and skills which will be used for the benefit of society. Now managers have cast themselves in the role of the hero – who already has the necessary skills for his epic adventure. Such skills as are not possessed can of course be readily acquired from the consulting organisations which are ever ready to sell their nostrums (Carter & Crowther 2000) to whoever wishes to purchase them. In the past the people recounted tales of the hero but now the hero recounts tales about himself. In the past the hero was deemed by the people to be so but now the hero is self-styled. Indeed the heroic role is no longer sufficient and these people have also assumed the role of the godhead, no longer is material reward sufficient for the hero now he also demands also worship and obeisance. And we have let it happen. The modern hero has committed the perfect crime (Baudrillard 1996) in which he is rewarded while others are punished – those who have allowed this to happen.

As Baudrillard (1996: 1-2) states of the perfect crime:

'This is the story of a crime - the murder of reality. And the extermination of an illusion - the vital illusion of the world. The real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion which disappears into integral reality..... Though the crime is never perfect, perfection, true to its name is always criminal..... But perfection is always punished: the punishment for perfection is reproduction.'

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