"Nothing in the world is harder than speaking the truth and nothing easier than flattery".

Fyodor Dostoyevsky *Crime and Punishment*

"Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified;
it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté
and illusion, from single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality.
Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being,
forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness".

Mikhail Bakhtin (1965: 122-123) *Rabelais and his World*

Introduction

Given the contemporary propensity of the politically powerful to practice buffoonery (Crace, 2021) a talent prominent fools in recent political office of some importance have perfected, present day opportunities for satire and irony are plentiful (Yates, 2014). However, it is less to these jokers that we turn in this paper. Instead, we wish to focus on our own profession; that of the academic. We will suggest that academics are especially well-positioned to play the role of jester not, we hasten to add, in any mode that is disrespectful: on the contrary, we frame it as an expression of courage and citizenship. Academics can assume the position of jester from different perspectives, without losing their credibility. We define the jester as a role that reveals organizationally uncomfortable truths through tease, irony and foolery, articulating what wiser counsel might think is "unspeakable", thus challenging taboos "without risking expulsion or social isolation" (Joost Beuving, 2017: 354).

Paradoxically, academics accepting the role of jester can better serve their intellectual license as actors that strive to research against the doxa, who seek to provide insights that unsettle conventional wisdoms.[1] Doing so does not simply means committing to a radical critique; as the court jesters of old, business academics perform a significant role in reproducing dominant beliefs, values, and practices (Vaara and Faÿ, 2012). Even when we commit to challenge management practices that we judge unsustainable or unethical, critique cannot be either the sole objective or a way to appease our guilty conscience. Critique, to be useful, commits to producing actual change (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Spicer et al., 2009). One way of doing this is through enhancing reflexivity. It may well be easier to

generate reflexive reform by pointing up the ridiculousness of what is taken for granted as organizational normalcy rather than losing one's audience by grandstanding opposition. Management and Organization Studies (MOS) can find much to reflect and to criticize. Organizations can indeed be very strange (McCabe, 2016), even tragi-comic (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012), Absurdities abound, such as setting sometimes tyrannical targets (Muller, 2019) as substitutes for managing realities (Seddon, 2008).[2]

Jesting may appear inappropriate if we view our role as producers of "more precise, more general or more accurate" theoretical and technical knowledge (Davis, 2010: 690). Yet have we scholars of the prosaic not also the responsibility of questioning and critically challenging the status quo, pleasing and displeasing on the basis of honesty? The art of humour is a serious business (Fletcher, 1974; Zijderveld, 1982; Zijderveld, 1983), honed historically in the traditions of the jester.

Several characteristics define the role of the jester, whose unifying trait is exposing or rendering salient the persistent contradictions of organization, paradoxically providing a space for critique, often through humour, (Otto, 2001; Rhodes, 2001b). The outcome of jesting is itself paradoxical: being ridiculous and tragic, wise and a fool, mocking and loyal. The jester both subverts and provides a safety valve, which distinguishes the role from both resistance and loyalty, although incorporating elements of both. Hence, performing the role of the jester allows accepting, embracing and navigating the contradictions that characterize the prosaic life of organizations (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Cunha and Putnam, 2019), untapping tensions that agitate but can also revitalize our disciplines' understanding of that of which they write. Historically, the jester has been an almost universal presence, throughout the ages, wherever the organization of governing was taken seriously (Otto, 2001). In absolute monarchies, the jester could cause rulers to doubt their actions, make them reconsider, relieving them of their courtly isolation from the plotting of the court. The jester, as a role

not constrained within courtly society, can act as a social mechanism that different people may perform in different ways at various moments (Välikangas and Sevón, 2010).

We start by outlining a history of the jester, exploring its historical and relational presence in theatres of power. We highlight the paradoxical traits of the jester to discuss the implications of the role the jester plays and might play in management learning. Our paper can be read as a defence of the role of the jester, with a special focus on the case of academics in front of their multiple audiences (students, managers, peers), with different audiences demanding different types of approaches. Academics in management face many sources of interpretation for which they cannot legislate the sense that is made by their audiences of executives and managers, students and others. When the messages are critical or questioning of practices taken for granted, there are various strategies with which to assert the power of their reason. These include claiming the authority of science, the most orthodox strategy, albeit one not necessarily persuasive for an audience not enrolled in the norms of one's community of practice. This is where jest is useful; humour can undercut positions secure in their doxa. Our paper explores various historical ways in which the role of the jester can be translated into contemporary management education and learning.

We define such jesting as the use of humour, satire and absurdity to perform a systematic challenging of organizational *doxa,* the taken-for-granted, unquestioned truths underpinning the functioning of an organization (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, jesting is inherently reflexive – if one is in on the joke, it can deepen enjoyment at work by pointing up irksome constraints on being at work. As Välikangas (2015: 559) elaborated, "Today's organizations, despite various external perspectives ranging from independent governance boards to outside auditors and consultants, seem to be in increasing need of such courageous and caring interventions". Such interventions have limits: the wish to keep interpersonal harmony intact, the lack of power to expose impossible requests, or simply the need to flatter the powerholder, may constrain individuals from speaking up (Cunha et al., 2019). In this

context, one variant of the jester may promote reflexive interventions, even if in oblique ways – a role that academics are well positioned to conduct. Doing this can constitute a viable response to pragmatic paradoxes that confront people with impossible choices (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Moreover, academic jesting may be critical in supporting inquiry (Schein and Schein, 2021), questioning crystallised power structures that resist change. We see this role not as a primary responsibility but as one that, wisely used, can serve to counter conventions as well as absurdities and rigidities.

We build on Weick's advice to cultivate ambivalence as an invitation to learn (Weick, 1998), involving a propensity to self-subvert. As Rhodes (2001b) suggests, there is an important element of ambivalence in jesting that mocks authority in a carnivalesque manner, opening space for critique without presuming to know what should be done. Academics, as will be discussed later, can exaggerate, use humour while making serious points and possibly maintaining poker faces, act serious but inject differing points of view while mediating between disconnected/contradictory discourses. The wise fool, in summary, embodies paradox by exposing the contradictions of organizing practices. Such exposure is itself paradoxical in that, despite its disruptive potential, its questioning strives to reposition order. Jesting in and with contemporary organizations both maintains *and* questions through practices of subversion (Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2017). We conclude by suggesting that laughter is a wise and undervalued way in which management learning can occur; hence, the usefulness of the jester as a figure whose verbal and nonverbal messages aim to convey uncomfortable truths that, if communicated other than as jest, would risk termination with extreme prejudice rather than producing reconsideration and change (Joost Beuving, 2017).

The historical role of the jester

Historically, being the court jester offered an elevated role in which to play the Fool (Klapp, 1948), with distinct social purpose. Central to western and non-western cultures, the jester is both an historical institution and a cultural trope (Otto, 2001). The role of the jester is critically necessary to counter the

rigidities of established power circuits and uncover absurdities and "secret" truths which, often, everyone knew, everyone knows that everyone knew, while everyone behaves as if they didn't know. Jesters often confront people with absurd situations and pragmatic paradoxes (Berti and Simpson, 2021) that are difficult to "unfreeze" and to change, even on the part of top executives, especially when they are engaged in circular dynamics (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Tsoukas and Cunha, 2017). In this sense, the modern jester's role can be played not only by a specific person (be it as an organizational member or an outsider) but also by top leaders and even by the CEO. Both Rhodes and Badham (2018) and Badham and Rhodes (2018) argue that a stance of 'ethical irony' and corresponding 'lightness of being' can be a productive and humane component of effective and meaningful leadership in uncertain, complex and paradoxical conditions (see also Badham and Santiago, 2021).

We see the jester as an archetypal character personifying paradox *and* pointing out life's paradoxes for others. The jester provides a productive metaphor useful in identifying different forms of paradox and considering how they may be treated and with what effect[3]. Teaching and learning through provocation, exaggeration, irritation and humour can be instrumental in revealing and coping with the paradoxes of organizing (Hahn et al., 2018). It is a well-established tradition, that some people in organizations may use jokes to alleviate the tension arising from having to deal with paradoxical requirements (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Mockery and parody are typical of situations in which humour is used to reveal cracks and faults in apparently impregnable structures and logics of hegemonic power. An historical example is the anarchic slogan adopted by Italian student movements in the 1970s, which explicitly employed ridicule and irony to subvert dominant discourses, "a laughter that will bury you all" (Gun Cuninghame, 2007). In organizational contexts, use of parody "denaturalizes culturally embedded… practices" and conceptions of organizational identity (Pullen and Rhodes, 2012: 512). The influence of the increasingly popular use of organizational theatre as a change technique is grounded in its effectiveness as parody, as Badham and Hafermalz (2019) point out.

In royal courts, jesters were allowed to tell the truth to the sovereign in an oblique way by acting as sage-fools whose function was "to disturb with glimpses of confounding truths that elude rational definition" (Knights, 1966: 98). As Joost Beuving (2017: 357) states, "jesters can hold up a mirror to society, showing its unpleasant sides, without the risk of losing their position – as anyone else doing likewise certainly would. Jesters can speak the unspeakable; they can say that the emperor has no clothes on and that the empress is obese". The famous Shakespearean line (from *Twelfth Night*) "wise enough to play the fool" well encapsulates a paradox that the historical figure of the court jester embodied. Shakespeare's fools were cast in the conventions of Elizabethan drama as the most insightful and intelligent person in the play, complex characters that could highlight important issues, speaking outside of the narrow confines of courtly society, able to move freely amongst all ranks, akin to what today we would term ethnographers, exhibiting wisdom and intelligence in commenting on the action but doing so playfully. The role of jester, the 'fool' in Shakespeare, allows its occupant to comment intelligently and reflexively on the action in the drama, often showing great facility with language, enabling a display of *ludic intertextuality*, playful but wise insight, an ability to unravel and entangle any argument, exemplified by Touchstone in *As You Like It* or Feste in *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare, 2007).

Humour can undermine and disrupt an existing order *translating* its presumptions and preferred interpretations "through revealing its paradoxes, inconsistencies and irrationalities" (Westwood and Johnston, 2013: 239). Being an entertainer, a prankster and a satirist provides the jester with a license to speak certain truths to power, framing as a joke what would otherwise be construed as disrespectful, subversive or even stupid, as Scarlett (2019) remarks. For jesters, exaggeration and mockery are essential resources in sustaining a public discourse, with parody being as important as rational deliberation in preserving independent thought (Hariman, 2008). An historical example of how mockery could be used to translate inconvenient truths is the story of the French jester who had to report a crushing defeat suffered by the royal fleet to King Phillip IV. He first attracted the king's

attention by screaming “The English cowards!”, and when asked by his sovereign to explain, he answered “because they don't even have the guts to jump into the water like our brave French!” (Otto, 2001: 113). In this example the jester personifies the archetypal character capable of critiquing power (of the king) and ideology (of nationalism) through jest (Zueva-Owens, 2019).

The anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 90) defined a “joking relationship” as “a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or to make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence”. Acting a role as “intelligent insane” (Dols and Immisch, 1992: 349), the jester was able to employ “subtle and sophisticated” forms of critique (Otto, 2015: 563), sometimes akin to that of the Socratic *gadfly*, a humble creature whose role is to irritate the state, “a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size” (Plato, 2018: 16). Jesters were allowed to abandon established norms, to violate expectations, to exaggerate and distort, challenging social hierarchies (within limits). Their role was well captured by George Bernard Shaw’s quip “every despot must have one disloyal subject to keep him sane” (in Kets de Vries, 1990: 767). Nonetheless, jesters were “*fiercely loyal* to the eminent objects of their foolish ridicule” (Välikangas and Sevón, 2010: 559, emphasis added), perhaps due to “a shared sense of isolation” (Otto, 2001: 49). The jester’s power to act was only *through* the monarch (Zueva-Owens, 2019: 19-20). Historically, in courtly society jesters were expected to act as much more than mere entertainers, performing various household responsibilities, including that of being the monarch’s messenger on the battlefield (Maitland, 2019). In the case of the Ottoman courts, the duties of court jesters could even include carrying out extrajudicial killings on behalf of the sultan (Dikici, 2006). Thus, the freedom to joke and tease was strictly bounded: the jester could offer critique, but exclusively within the boundaries of the court and its rules. Such jesters were effectively *consiglieri* to their rulers, aware of the rules of the court games, while also understanding what breaches might be allowed in the way of criticism as well as what the limits of such breaching behaviour might be. Rather like contemporary consultants, they had both to respect existing conventions while at the same time striving

to breach them if judicious in terms of practice that might rid the court of some persons troublesome to the chief executives' prospects.

Historically, the organizations in which jesters were nurtured, those of courtly society, were often plagued by flattery, obsequiousness and sycophancy (Westphal and Stern, 2007; Park et al., 2011). Organizational jesters were not always effective in fighting such symptoms either in the past or more recently. An illustrative and near contemporary case of the latter was Paul Birch, one of the best-known contemporary formally appointed corporate jesters, who was officially assigned the role between 1994 and 1995 of corporate jester for British Airways. Despite the positive publicity he brought to the airline, he was sacked by the new CEO, showing that – in contemporary organizations and medieval courts alike – jesters are always "dependent of the tolerance of [their] masters" (Otto, 2001: 268). Such dependency represents a paradoxical challenge for organizations: the masters *most likely* to benefit from the jester role are those *less likely* to welcome the jester's messages (Trump being the epitome, Kets de Vries, 2018). For the most problematic and toxic cases, such as this, it is almost impossible to jest beyond the joke that is arraigned in front of reason.

We will suggest that, even though explicit references to jesters have been rare in the management literature, several practices that can be assimilated to jesting have been considered in organization studies. We use the notion of the jester as an umbrella concept articulating several roles related to the functions associated with jesting. Next, we next consider the potential of the jester in the context of contemporary business education, elaborating the subtle distinctions in jesting that we have alluded to. These are the persona of the *gadfly, translator, consiglieri* and *ludic intertextualist*. These personae might well be present in the same performances but for analytic purposes we shall differentiate them, presenting the different performative elements in sharper focus, to discuss how jesting can be deployed in MOS to aid management learning.

The jester in the academy of management learning

In MOS, the complexity of the figure of the jester has been used as a demeaning term of reference (Donaldson, 1995; Lounsbury and Carberry, 2005). Donaldson uses it to attack what he saw as the coming doxa of "anti-management" postmodern theories, accusing them of not taking organizations seriously: "there is at times almost a quality of the jester or prankster about ... [the] view that organizations are the opposite of what they seem and that rationality in organizations is mythic" (Donaldson, 1995: 121-127). In riposte, as a jest, Donaldson (1997) was reviewed as a satire (Clegg, 1997). Lounsbury and Carberry (2005) used the notion of court jester to denounce organization theory's belittlement of the influence of Max Weber, noting that the tendencies to domination in organizations that characterized his time have not disappeared.

It is possible, we argue, to identify several different ways academics can play the important functions traditionally assigned to the jester in addition to those noted by Donaldson (1995), Clegg (197) and Lounsbury and Carberry (2005). Some critics criticize directly, others do so indirectly, through alternative and oppositional ideas. Some business school academics are *gadflies*, battling the forces that corrupt their own institutions; others may be seriously playful, *ludic intertextualists*, using humour while making serious points in their research findings; the business school *consiglieri*, striving to solve organisational problems through knowledge, injecting differing points of view as a consultant, may also have recourse to humour to breach routine ways of thinking, while others are *translators* who mediate between audiences and the complex codes of elaborated academic discourses displaying a "horizontal knowledge structure … a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and criteria for the construction and circulation of texts" (Bernstein, 1999: 162).

Gadfly: bringing change through irritation

The ideal-typical gadfly combines the convictions of knowledge, with a critical ethos that, if only it were followed, would help renewal and regrowth. Utilizing a subversive language, the gadfly challenges taken-for-granted assumptions, managerial hubris and the rigidity induced by past

successes (Miller, 1993). The gadfly effect on organization outcome arises from being irritants (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012) or parasites (Clegg et al., 2004). The role finds expression through critical authors (as business school employees) who maintain a distance from the system the better to perceive its flaws. When a scholar adopts the jester's role, they can use exaggeration to amplify the message's impact. They stress their distance, separateness from the system they criticize, mock and hassle. The gadfly's perspective has important advantages; namely, the permission to amplify parts of the message that might be better conveyed with a measure of voluntary distortion. Martin Parker is a masterful practitioner of the art, expressed in his claims against management (Parker, 2002), calls to shut down the business school (Parker, 2018), the critique of the McUniversity (Parker and Jary, 1995) or the association between Tony Soprano and organizational excellence (Parker, 2009). One can claim that the business school should be dead (Parker, 2014) in order to better expose its flaws.

Applications. The academic critic that mocks the system offers an interesting example of a necessary and thought-provoking but also problematic stance. The necessity of an external irritant for stimulating change derives from the impossibility of establishing an effective communication between distinct communication systems. Academics belonging to an auto-referential system that is separate to the other closed systems they study may better produce change in organizations not by rationally persuading decision makers but by provoking irritations, which trigger internal communications they cannot control (Luhmann, 2018; Cooren and Seidl, 2020).

Observing a system at a distance through a comedic lens affords an ambiguous space, in which laughter at something is indirectly laughing about us, one that MOS researchers have exploited. Westwood and Johnston (2013) researched the implementation of a 'workplace justice programme'. Excerpts from *The Office* were used in the justice programme to try and train normatively appropriate behaviour. Employees read the excepts as a parody of the performativity of management, gender and political correctness, a parody that they then were able to adopt in the work life. Ostensively, normative

regulation was served but the joke was in the detail. Through humour they were both maintaining an illusion of being regulated at the same time as their performance goaded the power and authority of their superiors through its evident inauthenticity; they were being gadflies, as the research revealed.

Despite these difficulties, academic practice that invites one to look at organizations with a satirical lens allows the potential exposure and ridicule of some organizational practices. The gadfly is especially qualified to study the fads, fashions and fetishism of organization theory and practice because these become more visible from outside the ranks of true believers and adherents. The gadfly observes organizations from a cynical distance. However, this 'distance' is difficult to maintain, especially as academic gadflies draw status and rewards from their role in reproducing the same practices at which they carp. As careers progress, what was once a source of satire can become a daily routine; jesters, much as poachers, can become gamekeepers administering those rules whose existence they once mocked (Bauman, 1987). The most intelligent gadflies acknowledge this contradiction, using humour to cope with the paradox, as does Parker in his reflections on his own role as a business school manager in an article titled "Becoming manager: Or, the werewolf looks anxiously in the mirror, checking for unusual facial hair" (Parker, 2004). A critical management gadfly can be seen as "parasitical to management. It is dependent on the very thing it critiques to provide them with an identity" (Huault et al., 2017: 1).

Ludic intertextualists: combining participation and 'playful' reflection

To be ludic is to be playful, engaging in free activity that deals with but is not an accustomed part of the seriousness of everyday livelihood (Huizinga, 1955). Ludic jesting is that combination of playfulness and work that sets itself at some distance from the normatively ordered 'seriousness' of the everyday work world, while acknowledging being an 'insider', embroiled in the communication and ordering system that is the target of jest. In our framework, James G. March exemplifies the ludic intertextualist as a researcher and generator of knowledge.

March advocated "playfulness", understood as a "deliberate, temporary relaxations of rules" (March, 1988: 261), as one of the components of a decisional technology based on "foolishness". As Larsen (2020) notes, in a later article March wrote explicitly about the "heroism of fools" (March, 2006: 211), manifesting in "blindly believing in an idea" and being "deaf to feedback from so-called reality". The technology of foolishness has been picked up and used by other scholars, such as Izak (2013), who sees foolishness as an integral part of wisdom, while Alvesson and Spicer (2012) explicitly see the majority of the normatively ordered 'seriousness' of the everyday work world as functionally 'stupid', lacking reflexivity, substantive (rather than formal) rationality that foolishness can punctuate, critique and enliven.

That stupid organizations can be sparked into new understandings by a little playfulness was integral to March's perspective. Playfulness can create moments of reflexivity, 'intelligent holes' in a dark space of routines, in which the sheer unreflective drudgery of much of that which passes for normal work can be glimpsed. New openings, twists and folds in the structures and routines of mundanity can be grasped, if glimpsed and reflected on. The point of a technology of foolishness is not to destroy order but to renew it, to make it new again, ideas that Gabriel (1995) explores with the concept of 'unmanaged spaces' in organizations. James March was an exemplary 'trickster of modernity', using his playfulness as part cover and part principled critique of the exaggerated certainties and over-seriousness of modern myths of organizational rationality, as observed by Badham and Santiago (2021).

March is not the only successful ludic jester in his writing; at a time when institutional theory had yet to be routinized in its current invention, the most creative theorist of institutions was already using the occasional ludic jest to make reflexive and telling points about organizations. Goffman's (1961) *Asylums*, which developed the notion of total institutions, did so by humbling the mighty and elevating the outcast. Elite boarding schools and psychiatric institutions were placed on an equivalent footing.

He showed that moral learning, inscribed in the curriculum and the playing fields of the former, also occurred on the part of the inmates of the institution, people whom Goffman regarded as equally having moral careers. We can go back to other liminal figures in our field, such as Veblen (1899 [2007]). As Watson (2011: 140) acknowledges, citing Conroy, when *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, was first published, "it was frequently misread as a *literary* satire of the nouveaux riches of the period [original emphasis] which missed entirely the seriousness of his social and economic criticism … genre expectation on the part of readers, not to mention the gatekeepers to publication, acts powerfully as an ideological effect and form of policing in the social sciences".

Further back in time, there are many passages of jest in Marx's (1976) *Capital.* Marx, as an intellectual insider deeply familiar with his political economy predecessors, such as John Stuart Mill, could be acerbically witty about their contributions (see Marx, 1976, footnote 31, page 221). More generally, Wheen's (2006) reading of *Capital* through Lawrence Sterne's (1950) *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy*, *Gentleman*, suggests a profound sense of jest. For Francis Wheen (2006),

> "Like Tristram Shandy, Das Kapital is full of paradoxes and hypotheses, abstruse explanations and whimsical tomfoolery, fractured narratives and curious oddities. How else could he do justice to the mysterious and often topsy-turvy logic of capitalism? (…) The book can be read as (…) a black farce (in debunking the "phantom-like objectivity" of the commodity to expose the difference between heroic appearance and inglorious reality, Marx is using one of the classic methods of comedy, stripping off the gallant knight's armour to reveal a tubby little man in his underpants) […] Or perhaps it is a satirical utopia like the land of the Houyhnhnms in Gulliver's Travels, where every prospect pleases and only man is vile: in Marx's version of capitalist society, as in Jonathan Swift's equine pseudo-paradise, the false Eden is created by reducing ordinary humans to the status of impotent, alienated Yahoos."

It is an interpretation that accedes with Edmund Wilson's (1940: 46) view that Marx was 'certainly the greatest ironist since Swift' (despite Sylvia Vassar (2000), the critic, writing in *The Times,* that such a view was a 'specious ploy'). While the interpretation that Marx was a humourist and a Gothic writer might seem shocking to the overly serious-minded, used to *Reading Capital* (Althusser and Balibar, 1971), we concur that the text is both deadly serious and deeply ironical. Indeed, Marx's work still inspires many contemporary organization theorists, including a past President of the Academy of Management (Adler, 2009).

Applications. Where to begin? The BBC perhaps. The British Broadcasting Corporation, long a stalwart organization for the promotion of comedy, took the unusual step in 2015 of launching *W1A,* an ironic comedy drama that was reflexive both about itself and organizational change. Siebert (2019) has used the series to apply the theoretical lens of intertextuality to analyse this application of ludic criticism to an organization undergoing change management. In doing so she notes a double hermeneutic in play; first, a prolonged satire and ironical discourse on the BBC; second, mockery of the management fads and fashions being used as tools of organizational development and change by the managers represented in the BBC. Focusing on this intertextuality is to follow a well-travelled route, as she outlines (Siebert, 2019), citing media including *The Simpsons* (Rhodes, 2001a), *The Bill* (O'Sullivan and Sheridan, 2005), *The Office* (Tyler and Cohen, 2008), *Wall Street* (Panayiotou, 2010), *The Firm* (Panayiotou, 2011), *Rawhide* (Watson, 2013), *Mad Men* (Buzzanell and D'Enbeau, 2014) and *The Wi*re (Holt and Zundel, 2014; Whiteman et al., 2017).

Ludic criticism that relies on intertextuality requires an audience sophisticated enough to get the joke at the expense of something for which there is a strong sense of commitment, a cause deemed noble and worthwhile, as well as an audience for its performance. It requires a sensibility capable of reading the performance on several levels simultaneously. While this may be presumed in the audience for the BBC, it seems to be in less supply elsewhere, for instance in business.

In a capitalist world of business, business schools that harbour certain sorts of intertextuality that are evidently pro-business will find much more appreciative and ready audiences than those oriented antithetically: the fate of critical scholars at Leicester University in the UK, many of whom have expressed themselves through their wit, such as Gibson Burrell's (1997) *Pandemonium,* is a case in point. It is a book that uses satire and playful construction as its premise, deliberately defying linear narrative conventions.

> In the body of the book, the top half of each book page goes forward in the normal linear manner, whilst the bottom half of each page goes backward, with arrows attempting to assist the reader on what is a difficult navigation. I reached what we traditionally think about as the end list of references, what Burrell (1997) refers to as the pandemonium municipal library. This was in the centre of the book, at which point there was a full-page illustration of an entrance/exit… As Burrell (1997) states linearity kills, so let's go backward … I began to appreciate that to go forwards I needed to go backward (Hughes, 2018)

As the reviewers of this text in *Management Learning* noted, the book is a playfully contrived mixture of jokes and provocations, as well as insights (Case and Selvester, 1999).

Consigliere: serious jesting

Jesting has not been exclusively expressed through humour and mockery: at times, court jesters engaged in very serious activities, adopting the persona of the *consigliere*. Consiglieri explicitly apply judgments wrapped up in jest with the intent of helping organizations to overcome their self-induced limitations. The jester would warn the sovereign in jest of the likely ramifications on the court of decisions being pondered. The antecedents of this view are classical: in Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* the pre-Socratic philosopher and rhetorician, Gorgias, is commended on as the first theorist to stress the relation between humour and rhetoric, he did so, Aristotle maintains, by killing an opponents' earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness (Aristotle, 1991) Not only the ancient

Athenians but also the orators of Rome were acutely aware of the power of jest: “a jest, or a laugh, often dispels distasteful suggestions not easily weakened by reasoning”(Cicero, 1988: 374). Perhaps mindful of these cautions, Oliver Cromwell abolished the post of English court jester when he became Lord Protector of the British Isles (1653-1658). Indeed, his devout construction of a Puritan order did not sit well with any questioning, including that of a jester-consigliere.

Contemporary managers can pursue that which is purportedly purposeful and technically rational (Weber, 1922 [1978]) with a great deal of earnestness (Kelaway, 2017). Often the earnest ‘bullshit’ to which Kelaway rightly objects is the result of a fashionable approach promoted by consultants. An author and consultant, such as ten Bos (2000), sees consulting fashions as a source of rational organization, a message delivered partly in paradoxical jest by that may be lost on the most earnest managers. In such contexts, Gorgias’ advice is appropriate. Learning how to use humour to stimulate learning can thus be a form of identifying problems and facilitating change. As Kets de Vries (1990: 764) stated, “one among many other roles a consultant has to assume” can involve playing the fool:

> “This does not mean that in the normal course of events the consultant is asked specifically to take on the role. Often, both parties aren’t even aware that he or she is doing so nor how important the role is in keeping the organization firmly tied to reality. Occasionally, however, senior executives realize how essential a ‘corporate jester’ can be”.

Applications. The academic consigliere can induce doubt. Academics, being in a liminal position (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), may use their status to ask questions that others cannot. Doing so implies a condition of independence that is not guaranteed as consultants, who strive to solve organizational problems through knowledge transfer partnerships, have an equivocal independence. Academics may be hired for specific events (training, shows) to emphasize organizational dimensions that need change but, much as Gorgias, must approach the earnestness of their hosts with care. These events often respond well to presentation of issues difficult for the audience in a light mode.

Organizational recourse to academia may serve to illuminate the functioning of power circuits, normally hidden and conveyed in interpersonal relationships that become normal and uncontested (Kahn and Rouse, 2020). Academic independence permits all sorts of questioning, including that which could be perceived as revealing ignorance or even invite ridicule. The academic counsellor can help circulation of ideas by giving voice and legitimacy to employees' experiences by incorporating them in their research findings and in their consulting, showing the ways in which earnest ideas may be received not in all seriousness but as a bad joke by those subjected by them. As Critchely (2006) argues, those who have been employed in a factory or office in a low status position knows that scurrilous stories, songs and cartoons about management are essential to dealing with the foolishness all too often inflicted on them in the name of earnestness. Human Resource professionals can employ the jester toolkit to ease the tensions emerging between management and employees, acting as intermediaries (similarly to jesters connecting the court and the sovereign), facilitating communication by representing the interests of both groups, by judiciously using humour to ease tensions and by bringing different perspectives (Sender and Mormann, 2021). Similarly academic can facilitate communication between different stakeholders (helping 'speaking truth' to power), by explaining that the jokes told by staff members are not a sign of their foolishness, but a coping mechanism they develop in order to navigate contradictory requests (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017), making organizational elites better aware of the consequences of their decisions for lower orders of being.

Translator: the jest is in translation

Finally, authentic attempts at challenging orthodoxy can come from actors that perform the role of translation. Academic management and organization journals are extremely difficult for non-initiates to read as they are written by cognoscenti; this can pose problems in trying to translate these ideas to classrooms or workshops. The classic academic example of the jest being in the translation is that of C. Wright Mills (1959) translating Talcott Parsons' (1951) abstruse theoretical 'system'. Few can have read this without raising a smile. Not only academic sociologists but also critically inclined

management and organization scholars frequently play this role. Asked to present to an MBA class or a meeting of local businesspeople on a current topic, such as stretch goals, humour becomes a handy way of both explaining and cautioning against being too convinced (Cunha et al., 2016). When business school academics take part in a panel of industry experts, provoking innovative thought by challenging some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and principles that frame discussion, using humour to translate insights from their field into that of those unfamiliar with it disarms. Attempts to bring about reform and emancipation in organizational practices under the banner of critical performativity, organized efforts to make critical research more relevant outside academia, producing social change (Spicer et al., 2009; Spicer et al., 2016), would also fit this bill. The approach explicitly aims at promoting new forms of organizing that are more socially and environmentally sustainable.

Applications. In some instances, academics may adopt a role of jester engaged in translation to encourage questioning of taken-for-granted philosophical, ethical or human 'truths' of everyday life or of those novelties that are often imported by management fashion and fads. Of course, a teacher may also invite students to assume such a role; encouraging them to understand the organizational roles of the jester in history may be beneficial in this regard. Proponents of critical performativity might frown at the 'wise-folly' of trying to bring about emancipatory change only through a communicative performance but by using humour they can inspire, stir, galvanize audiences, planting the seeds of change, as they translate taken-for-granted practices into a joke against a different form of knowledge, grown and seeded in a distinct but alien community of practice, one embedded in a specifically academic form of life. Humour is a tool that may provide a measure of protection against political risk (Anagondahalli and Khamis, 2014). In some cases, translators can go beyond the use of humour, criticising not by confronting in a straightforward direct way but by making fun of assumptions that are scientifically questionable (Clegg, 1997).

Students and executives participating in training programs may develop awareness about the relevance and added value of jesting that warns against absurdities and blind spots. Such jesting may operate as a critical mirror, allowing identification of "imperfections", as perceived by diverse stakeholders. Note, however, that this form of jesting may neutralize its effectiveness when mobilized by agendas that polarize and disengage those whom they should be able to convince; at this point that which is being translated runs the risk of being seen as more ideological dogma than scientific work. Where this is the case, performativity becomes a source of conflict rather than an occasion for reflexive change. Such activism may even make organizations and authorities bunker themselves within rationalistic-economics arguments that hinder change.

Questioning management learning through jesting

The four approaches are distinct in many aspects. However, all share a common paradoxical trait, the challenging of the organizational *doxa*, the consistent set of tacit assumptions, taken-for granted practices and self-reinforcing power structures that both enable and constrain organized action in a specific context. Each of these four positions is imbued with a specific pivotal tension and emphasizes one of the four paradoxes inherent to jesting mentioned above. *Gadflies* exaggerate and distort, (a requirement for parody and satire), to reveal deeper truths. For the *ludic intertextualists*, it is essential to navigate the wise-fool contradiction, putting jesting at the service of what can be performed as if it were rational rather than being ideological, a performance whose effects depend on the receptivity of the audience. *Consiglieri* may cope with the need to embrace organizational goals and respecting local expertise, while adding value by offering different perspectives and sources of knowledge with which they can challenge entrenched ways of doing things. The *academic translator* deals with the contrast between life worlds, translating from the esoteric into the mundane, using humour to distance the self as translator from the seriousness and abstruseness of that being translated. Sometimes overlapping

academic and intervention orientations can create reputational issues on both academic and practice fronts.

Academics as jesters can provide contemporary MOS with stimuli for change and learning (Ackoff, 1993; Kets de Vries, 1990), as challengers of the status quo. All these actors will face the paradoxical difficulties corresponding to the role, given the nature of the function, while organizations may benefit from their presence. They can do so because of the purpose of jesting as both unsettling and supportive of organizational functioning. Jesting aims at critically probing a set of accepted truths that, if left unquestioned, would lead to competency traps (Levinthal and March, 1981; Heracleous et al., 2017), and to (dys)functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). In doing so, academic jesting does not necessarily undermine the status quo but it can point to some of its pathologies.

Revealing contradictions is a necessary precondition for effectively coping with paradoxical tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Yet, it is not sufficient. First, it is necessary for actors to have sufficient agency to cope with the tension (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Other conditions include being accepting of dualities and contradiction (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), the ability to develop practices that allow for navigating paradoxes flexibly (Jay, 2013) as well as being able to ease tensions through irony (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). A judicious application of jest in management education can foster the development of these conditions: alerting the powerful to the perils of their hubris and excessive concentration of power; enabling the circulation of 'subversive' ideas; creating space for play and experimentation of new organizing possibilities.

At best, the idea of jester has been introduced to express the opportunity to allow criticism with impunity (Grugulis, 2002; Miller, 1993) or to act as change agents (Ackoff, 1993; Kets de Vries, 1990) without responsibility for what ensues. Contemporary organizations may benefit from the services of academics as jesters. As Välikangas and Sevón (2010: 559) observe, contemporary organizations – in

spite of external perspectives brought by independent boards, outside auditors and consultants – need independent, courageous and caring interventions. As an "outsider on the inside" (Otto, 2015: 568), academic jesters can alert and challenge the status quo, creating "doubt over our most heartfelt beliefs", through irony and other forms of critical imagination, fostering a great awareness of problematic situations that "de-stabilize and de-naturalize hegemonic discourses", conveying truth to power (Brassett, 2009: 220, 230).

In the case of academics, exaggeration can become a caricature of reality rather than a call for reflection. Its expression therefore involves a delicate combination for the academic jester, if only because de-sacralising leaders and managers has its own dangers as well (Grint, 2010). Jesting has practical and ethical limits and may simply be inappropriate in face of the challenge to desacralize leadership without destroying its sacred nature. The centrality of notions of rationality and technique to contemporary management and organization studies would seem to leave little space for the liberties of jesting.

The 'truth' that jesting can help expressing is by no means a correct, univocal representation of an objective state of things. It is rather the possibility of the multiplicity of perspectives, interests, positions and logics that are implicated in an organization. In this, the communicative role of the academic jester is characterized by what Bakhtin defined as addressivity, the idea that any utterance is always directed to someone:

> "Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addresses, and the force of their effect on the utterance" (Bakhtin, 1986: 95).

Thus, all utterances may address multiple truths, incorporating an heteroglossia of resources. As a playful intermediary, who can both faithfully report the views of different stakeholders while critically

challenging them, the academic jester can help understanding how power relations produce rationality and truth (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Instead of demarcating roles (between decision-makers and executors; practitioners and academics; organizational members and non-members), it can support their blending, in the common effort to navigate collaboration tensions and to negotiate divergences of interest.

Management learning can incorporate jesting in both the practice of organizations and the management curricula. In line with Välikangas (2015), academic jesting can be framed as an expression of a logic of care in organizational contexts saturated by power relations (Clegg, 1989). Used constructively, to surface and reframe contradictions and paradoxes that characterize MOS, the jester has value as a source of creativity and learning (Smith and Lewis, 2011), especially when met with a capacity to accept and be invigorated by tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Strategies to navigate such tensions can include momentary separation of opposite poles (Poole and van de Ven, 1989), the use of practices to "work through" paradox (Smets et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) or the development of interpretative rhetoric that reframe contradictions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Abdallah et al., 2011). Closer to professional concerns, when constrained by limits on agency in responding to organizational contradictions, debilitating pragmatic paradoxes ensue (Berti and Simpson, 2021). When management academics are forced by imperative directives to demonstrate that each of their research outputs simultaneously adds to ground-breaking theory and has accessible impact on practices, paralysis and frustration will likely ensue amidst the black humour that follows.

Jesting, as a set of practices leveraging humour, satire and absurdity to question the taken-for-granted 'truths' that enable but also constrain organizational action is a paradoxical strategy. It is so literally, in that its purpose is to challenge the *doxa* but it is so substantially because its purpose is to challenge equilibrium. Jesting acts as a form of meta-communication, a message aimed at providing instruction on how to interpret other messages (Watzlawick et al., 1967): as such it allows making contradictions and issues salient (so that they can be treated) without causing a breakdown in the system. While it

seems challenging to fragile structures of power, as was the case for the Soviet regime (Davies, 2007), it can strengthen already robust forms of domination.

The implications for management learning should be clear: do not fear critique and satire; do not lionize obscurity and seriousness; use humour and laughter to "broaden-and-build" (Fredrickson, 2013: 1). Innovative ways to deconstruct organizational taboos and convey truth to power can bring humour, laughter and jesting not just to the boardroom but also to the classroom, where current and future boardrooms are educated and trained. A lesson that jests against its audience, especially those most powerful in it, is a lesson much more likely to be remembered and acted on than one that dulls imagination through ritual incantations of scholarly legitimization. To be sure, the latter may be needed to make it to print but to make ideas public in performance, a facility with an apt jest and a ready, if sometimes, scabrous wit, may stand the learning in good stead. MOS, perhaps, needs to be less serious to imbue more seriousness in discussions about rigidities, dogma and absurdities in organizational life. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the limits of jesting as a form of critique and challenge to the status quo. While jesting can help questioning and preserving the sanity of an organizational system, correcting its inequalities and distortions cannot be taken for granted.

Conclusion

The liberation afforded by laughter "speaks to the joy of losing ourselves in collective play with ideas, a serious play of bantering, associations, ridicule of established ways, and combinations of things few people may ordinarily think belong together" (Carlsen et al., 2012: 23). In keeping with this spirit, in this article we defended the importance of jesters' roles as expressing a "paradoxical combination of cleverness and foolishness" (Otto, 2001: 38), in which foolishness is a way of not deferring to a set of norms but of questioning them. Specific ways of filling the role of being an academic jester were identified. In conclusion, with the literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), we see laughter and ridicule function as a challenge to the (sometimes stupid) seriousness attributed to authority and power.

Laughter can free earnest illusion, something we should understand as, with Kelaway (2017: n.p.), we encounter the bullshit so often practised by management, “usually of a puffed-up variety that pretends to be something it is not. Sharp eyes will spot at once the difficulty in applying this to corporate life — almost everything fits the description”. Jest has its purposes. As (Carlsen et al., 2012: 159) suggested, through laughter, people are liberated from illusions, “able to take the high and mighty down from their pinnacle and into the gutter to create meaning anew”. People, in this instance, could include those denizens of MOS who strive to add to management learning in corporate and classroom life.

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[1] The etymological root of the term paradox, as going against (*para*) commonly held knowledge (*doxa*), highlighting the importance of challenging conventional wisdom.

[2] A case in point was that of the CEO who said that "We are here in order to change the world. (…) Nothing less than that interests me" Edgecliffe-Johson A and Platt E (2020) WeWork: how the ultimate unicorn lost its billions. *Financial Times*, 22 February / 23 February,, (accessed). The speaker was Adam Neumann, co-founder and former CEO of WeWork. Neumann was known for his recreational marijuana use and for encouraging drinking, particularly in raucous tequila sessions, at work events. He sometimes showed up barefoot inviting his team to hold hands and pray in the pursuit of his vision; in reality, what he achieved was the creation of an organization culture that tolerated gender discrimination,

recreational drug use inspired by the CEO, nepotism and sexual harassment Yaffe-Bellany D (2019) WeWork's Ousted C.E.O. Adam Neumann Is Accused of Pregnancy Discrimination. *The New York Times*, November 1, B4, (accessed).. It is hard to imagine any sane response to the practice of such presumption, pretension and posturing, hardly world-changing but criminally endangering. While Neumann as a leader should not be taken seriously, he is not unique. Faced with such entitled executive behaviour, management scholars may need to jest and to do so seriously

[3] We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this formulation.