Images of metaphors for organization and strategy

Dr Damian Ruth
Department of Management
Massey University, Wellington
d.w.ruth@massey.ac.nz

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ABSTRACT

The title signals an acknowledgement to Morgan’s *Images of Organization* and Cumming & Wilson’s *Images of Strategy*. The relationship between metaphor and image is tricky; organic metaphors for organization lead to biological images and metaphors of positioning, orientation and direction for strategy lead to maps.

This paper is the start of an exploration into what might happen if we took the image as our starting point and worked back though metaphor to a theory of organization. It starts, in the spirit of the conference, with an archetypal images of Aotearoa: the paper provides reflection on the koru. The spiral form is not uniquely Aotearoan, but an ancient one, and given the large numbers of New Zealanders with Celtic heritage, it is appropriate to explore especially the Celtic form of its rich history. This is a basis for the central research question of this paper; can an exploration of the spiral be a meaningful way to enrich organization theory? This will entail a limited and tentative deconstruction of common metaphors in strategy and organization theory.

The paper explores the use of images and metaphors in general, and contrasts the use of archetypal images with the kind of images and models routinely found in management textbooks, such as matrices, boxes, and arrows linking circles. This deconstruction is applied to the primary research question itself: there is no intention to promote the spiral as a management tool!

Introduction

The images of organization explored by Morgan are organizations as machines, as organisms, as brains, as cultures, as political systems, as psychic prisons, as flux and transformation, and finally, as instruments of domination. The images of strategy suggested by Cummings and Wilson and the contributors to this volume are strategy as ethos, as organizing, as intention and anticipation, as orchestrating knowledge, as data plus sense-making, as creativity, as exploration and interconnection, as systems thing, as process, power and change, as marketing, as numbers, as decision making, as orientation and animation. All of the authors are writing against a broad background of theory that has over the centuries been derived from and contributed to very different and sometimes opposing worldviews. Thus, Morgan writes of machines, mechanical thinking and the rise of the bureaucratic organization, and concludes that we can usefully use metaphor to read and understand organizations, and that many organization problems are due to ways of thinking:

Images and metaphors are not only interpretative constructs or ways of seeing, they also provide frameworks for action. Their use creates insights that often allow us to act in way they we may not have thought possible before (page 343).

He proposes the idea of ‘imaginization’ as a way of linking thought and action and as a means though which people may enact or ‘write’ the character of
organizational life (page 344). Morgan wishes to stress the creative potential of images and metaphor.

The perspective in Cummings and Wilson is wider than Morgan’s, and in their contextualising chapter Cummings and Wilson range from pre-modern to post-modern views. They invoke a dense array of metaphors in the process; map, animation, web, pyramid, montage and so on, and an interesting interleaving of images; maps, historical photographs, analytical historical drawings and schematic models from modern business books. They are not above supplying a matrix of their own. The collection edited by Cummings and Wilson is built on the interplay of many images of strategy rather a collection of images. They invite a nomadic approach and use Arthur Koestler’s phrase ‘shaking hand’ in the light of particular purposes and circumstances.

These writers are very aware that metaphors not only enable a point of view but obscure others. They produce a ‘kind of one-sided insight’ (Morgan :13). The highlighting of certain interpretations forces other into the background. In both of these texts, the effort is directed not at promoting particular metaphors but at gaining as much as possible from the interplay of metaphors.

**Uses of metaphor**
Understanding
Critique
Exploration

The images in mainstream management texts, not surprisingly, tend to be geometric. Although this seems appropriate, it bears examination. The reliance on 2-dimensional representation, despite the knowledge of perspective, the use of standard shapes and directional arrows to represent a specific idea can also be analysed to find out what more fundamental world outlook is embodied such representations. *Analysing examples...*

**Images**

There are several archetypal universal images, signifying male, female, and natural objects and phenomena, such as sun, moon and trees, for example. There are also fundamental geometric shapes like the square, circle and triangle. The spiral seems to be a universal archetype that sits somewhere between image, metaphor and geometry. In some cultures, as in Aotearoa it is clearly derived from nature. In Celtic culture, as in the Newgrange Neolithic burial mounds, it functions as a sophisticated code. In Islamic art it is used as a basis for decorative display, but also expresses a sense of the Islamic world view.

Paintings
Symbols/nationalism
Identification
Community
The spiral

Not just Aotearoa, but Ireland, Romania and many ancient cultures...

The spiral in the world… further explorations, expanding on above...

Centripetal & centrifugal
Upward & downward

Feminine forms…

Mapping management knowledge

In general…
In Aotearoa…

On models, matrices and the geometrical imagination

The usual suspects…
What does a model do?...
What do matrices do?...
Geometry and maps…

Images of organization in Aotearoa

The koru shape is a scroll shape and is linked to the New Zealand fern plant. The shoot of the fern has a curled-over tip which unfurls and becomes a fernleaf.

The koru reaches towards the light, striving for perfection, encouraging new positive beginnings…

The koru, represents the unfolding of new life, that everything is reborn and continues. It represents renewal and hope for the future.

Spiral, geometry of life, sacred creation…"

Conclusion

So the major research question remains. Is the spiral a successful heuristic for the nature of organizations and strategy? This entails other questions, such as how heuristically successful can reflection on an image be, and does this method offer any particular advantages?

NOTE

This is the best I can do in the time available, but is hopefully sufficient to give a sense of where the paper is going. The presentation will be illustrated, and much of the material is drafted. I am at this stage wishing to explore the general idea.