

4<sup>th</sup> Conference on Critical Management Studies (CMS): Management and Organizational History Stream

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ABSTRACT:

The making of the “Suhrkampkrise”. Oedipus, Dame Fortune and the power of the tropes. How language shapes business reality.

This treatise on Siegfried Unseld, the late head of Suhrkamp Verlagsgruppe (publishers of literature in Frankfurt am Main) and a prominent figure in Germany's publishing trade, brings into focus a subject which is notably absent from business history and management studies alike: the function of the narrative. While post-modernism has made quite an impact on the humanities, current economic history has yet to take into account that language organises and structures our view of the world and shapes the facts of “reality” as we know them.

This issue is highly relevant since entrepreneurs and enterprises are, in essence, a semantic construction. They are the result of a complex interplay between self-projection and mass media. Managers are, as Alfred Kieser and Cornelia Hegele put it, heroes and villains of our age with magazines praising the unique achievements of these corporate chieftains, in form and function not unlike medieval legends of saints.<sup>1</sup> This study therefore analyses the function of figurative speech and tropes in public discourse as well as discursive strategies of businessmen to control the construction of their own mythos. Hayden White's theory as a new approach to economic history<sup>2</sup> is here taken to account.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelia Hegele, Alfred Kieser, Control the Construction of Your Legend or Someone Else Will. An Analysis of Texts on Jack Welch, in: Journal of Management Inquiry, Vol. 10 Nr. 4 (2001), p. 290-309.

<sup>2</sup> For the main part: Hayden White, Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect. Baltimore 1999, Hayden White, The Content of the Form, Baltimore und London 1987; Hayden White, Tropics of

Siegfried Unseld was quite a celebrity in his time. A larger-than-life figure both for his public supporters and most ardent critics, to some he was deemed brilliant – related to Jove<sup>3</sup> no less – while others held him to be the “old Nick” (“Gottseibeius”<sup>4</sup>) of Germany’s literary scene or else regarded him as a very clever business executive with PR expertise. Suhrkamp, the literary publishing firm Unseld directed since 1959, has a reputation for shaping what British literary critic George Steiner has called “Suhrkamp Culture”<sup>5</sup> in post-war Germany, a key-term eagerly adopted by the Suhrkamp PR-department. A growing number of prominent authors such as Bert Brecht and Hermann Hesse, Theodor Adorno, Max Frisch, Martin Walser, Uwe Johnson, Isabella Allende, Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, Peter Hanke and Durs Grünbein are adding to its prestige. Suhrkamp has thus gained a reputation for its leading role in intellectual debates and for setting literary standards which have far outweighed its economic capacity.

This paper does not aim at the deconstruction of a legend, however. The emperor’s clothes are not questioned here. It aims to achieve a deeper understanding of semantic processes which construct entrepreneurs as icons of collective identity. Hayden White’s tropology has been adapted as a guide to a highly sensitive and discriminating mode of “readerly behaviour”<sup>6</sup> in examining the source material. This includes an archive of several hundred newspaper articles ranging from the early 1970s to Unseld’s death in 2003 as well as correspondence between authors and their publisher, together with essays and books in which Unseld explores his own business ideas and the ideal relationship between literary authors and their publisher. Generally speaking, the discourse on Suhrkamp Verlag is following the trope synecdoche as Siegfried Unseld is identified with the company as a whole, or symbolising the qualities presumed to inhere in the totality.<sup>7</sup> For decades, he

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Discourse; Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore 1985; *Hayden White*, Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Baltimore and London 1973.

<sup>3</sup> *Verena Auffermann*, Der Zeus aus Frankfurt. Der Suhrkamp-Verleger Siegfried Unseld wird siebzig, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28.9.1994

<sup>4</sup> *Lothar Wolf*, Das Gute ist immer neu, in: *Buchkultur* (Vienna), Nr. 2 1994

<sup>5</sup> *George Steiner*, Adorno: Love and Cognition, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 9.3.1973.: „Almost single-handed, by force of cultural-political vision and technical acumen, the publishing firm of suhrkamp has created a modern philosophic canon. In so far as it has made widely available the most important, demanding, philosophical voices of the age, in so far as it has filled the bookshelves with the presence of that German-Jewish intellectual an nervous genius which Nazism sought to obliterate, the Suhrkamp initiative has been a permanent gain.“

<sup>6</sup> *Hans Kellner*, Language and Historical Representation. Getting the Story Crooked. Madison (Wisc.), 1989, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> *Hayden White*, Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Baltimore and London 1973, p.34.

successfully managed to have journalists echo his vigorous self-advertisement. Unseld's strategies were a highly figurative language and a small repertoire of anecdotes, e.g. his favourite metaphors, the oxymoron of literature being a "sacred commodity" and his self-description as being "Janus-faced". He prided himself on combining the virtues of business and patronage, thus establishing a superior relationship with the "Suhrkamp-authors", another catch-phrase eagerly adopted by the media.

While the original study<sup>8</sup> covered several more aspects such as the firm's founding myths and counter-legends installed by competitors, it would seem appropriate to focus here on the so-called Suhrkamp-crisis.

In December 1990, Siegfried and Joachim Unseld (his only son and designated successor as head of Suhrkamp Verlag) decided to go separate ways – a rift that was to prove beyond mending. While the official note published by the company coolly stated that the concept of shared responsibility for the firm had proven unsatisfactory, the yellow press immediately picked on the juicier and more private aspects of the matter. It was Verena Auffermann's commentary in the prestigious *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, however, which set the tone for the evolving discourse. Auffermann introduced the metaphor of Oedipus into the public debate.<sup>9</sup> Thus the affair assumed the proportions of an ancient drama.

It is a prime example of how conventions of the narrative shape the public view and, ultimately, reality. Hayden White's archetypes of emplotment emerge clearly as journalists organised the facts into a story, thus adding coherence and explanation in the form of archetypal narratives. The evolving discourse then followed a pattern which, according to Hayden White, is of an anthropological quality.

Most journalists of name and rank followed suit, tapping into an array of associated plots and metaphors, thus typecasting the father in the archetypal role of the ogre-like tyrant and his son as an immature youth defying his parent. Cast in the perspective of synecdoche, the personal drama appeared as a business crisis despite the lack of evidence to a supposed decline.

The public debate on the unsolved question of succession predominated the coverage for more than a decade, in which several candidates were presented and withdrawn again. The press dubbed them "crown princes", mostly sticking to

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<sup>8</sup> The author's unpublished Master's Thesis.

metaphors of semi-aristocracy which first emerged in the context of industrialisation and are up to the present day commonly applied to entrepreneurs. Other metaphors include the wheel of fortune and more general pictures of waxing and waning, such as autumn following summer etc. In the course of the study it became evident that not economic fact but narrative conventions enticed journalists to look out for and invent, too, signs of economic problems and a decline in literary standards. The public praise of the 60s and 70s seemed to call for disaster and deterioration later on, while routine and mediocrity would not have made a scoop.

While most metaphors are used in parallel, certain word fields tend to dominate at any given time. This shift in semantics may be interpreted as a shift from synecdoche (the superior father used *pars pro toto* for the Oedipus-motive) to metonymy (the patriarch), thereby criticising Unseld for his rather autocratic management style. This is accompanied by a change of perspective, as the events are first explained by comparison to the drama of Oedipus and then by highlighting the roles of single *personis dramae*. At the same time an ironic perspective is introduced into the discourse, identifying the “Suhrkampkrise” as a semantic construction and questioning it as such. As Hayden White would suggest, this shift in tropes would be a natural development following its own rules which are poetic in nature and determine their own reality.

Hayden White’s tropology has proven itself a fine instrument for describing the deep structural content of a discourse that is generally poetic and specifically linguistic in nature. The study reveals the interplay of self-projection and public opinion, a tension between synecdoche – describing the company by its owner’s character traits – and a number of shifting tropes which distinguish the media discourse. White’s thesis of language determining the view of the world became quite apparent. However, it proves impossible to falsify his assumption of pre-critical elements governing perception and organising text. He also neglects the important question of power distribution in public discourse, whereas this study would indicate that a journalist’s reputation and path-dependency in general play a major role in shaping a discourse. For Suhrkamp Verlag, Unseld’s popularity is both asset and liability. Since the 1990s and up to the present day his successors commodify Unseld’s mythos and struggle to live up to the legend he constructed so well.

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<sup>9</sup> Verena Auffermann, Generationsfrage im Hause Unseld, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 6.12.1990