

Exploring Critical Perspectives of Toxic and Bad Leadership through Film

Gareth Edwards, Doris Schedlitzki, Jenna Ward and Martin Wood

Abstract

The Problem - This paper considers concepts of toxic and bad leadership from a critical, post-structuralist perspective and illustrates how this can be conveyed to management students through the use of film analysis. In response to the paucity of critical approaches within toxic and bad leadership studies, we suggest that film is a useful way of developing in-depth discussion in student and management groups to uncover underlying subtleties and complexity in leadership theory and practice.

The Solution - We connect to film clips from *Batman: the Dark Knight*, and explain how this film is used with students and managers to illustrate the ambiguous nature of 'good' and 'bad' leadership and explore the fluid, shifting and relational nature of these two concepts. We conclude that students and managers can recognise this more readily through viewing, discussing and analysing film clips such as the ones discussed herein.

Stakeholders – university lecturers and students, executive educators and managers, general HRD professionals

Keywords - film analysis, toxic leadership, critical leadership theory, leadership learning

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the use of sequences from the film *Batman: The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008)¹ for discussions with UK-based undergraduate and postgraduate (including MBA and executive MBA) students. In

¹ *Batman - The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) is part of a series of contemporary interpretations of the popular comic book character Batman. In the film, *The Dark Knight*, we see the title character, Batman (played by Christian Bale), battling against his arch rival The Joker (played by Heath Ledger). The Joker and his accomplices rob a bank in fictional Gotham City. The bank in question is used by the local mob for

the classroom, we relate the film to relational and critical aspects of leadership studies, and, in turn, highlight the importance of taking these perspectives when discussing issues around toxic or bad leadership. We suggest that the storyline of this particular film reflects how societies' perceptions of good and evil have come to dictate the way we define toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), a concept theorised within leadership and management studies. We suggest that the film produces a reality, that embodies a complex ambiguity between 'good' and 'evil' whilst simultaneously epitomising a sense of chaos, change and meaning making that are often key characteristics of instances or frames of leadership (Wood & Ladkin, 2008). The comic book iconography of previous representations of Batman has continually pitched the heroic 'Batman' and his sidekick 'Robin' against an array of stereotypically 'evil' enemies, most notoriously 'The Joker'. However, the 2008 cinematic version of the Batman storyline served to problematize such simplistic dichotomy of good and evil, primarily through the introduction of a deeper and 'darker' narrative which allows the film to create the effect of how good and evil are perhaps more ambiguous, more relational than previous illustrations of Batman and indeed much of the academic leadership literature portrays. The nature of this complex ambiguity is expressed in the apparently contradictory title, *The Dark Knight*. We suggest, therefore, that analysing this film with managers and students in a classroom setting helps them to contemplate the more critical, relational and discursive perspectives on leadership and toxic leadership specifically.

Leadership: A Critical Perspective

Recently, there has been a move towards developing critical, relational and discursive approaches to leadership studies (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2009; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst, 2009; Ford, 2010; Ford & Harding, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Wood, 2005; Zoller & Fairhurst 2007) that seek to explore the situated power relations between leaders, managers and followers. These critical approaches now have the challenge of being communicated within management and leadership development (e.g. Ford & Harding, 2007) and in the classroom to undergraduate, postgraduate and executive education students. We suggest that the use of film enables and facilitates this transference into the learning environment and in a way that inspires and enlarges students' minds and imaginations.

money laundering purposes. Meanwhile, the city attorney (Harvey Dent, played by Aaron Eckhart) teams up with Batman to eradicate this mob.

Since 2010 we have been using scenes from the film *Batman: The Dark Knight* in class to think about and discuss issues of 'toxic' (e.g. Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or 'bad' (e.g. Kellerman, 2004) leadership with management students. From this experience we have found that discussions around this subject relate to three particular critical perspectives of leadership that can also be related more specifically to notions of toxic and bad leadership. These critical perspectives of leadership are a psychosocial approach (Ford, 2010), a relational approach (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and a critical commentary on leadership development (Ford & Harding, 2007). These approaches provide the backdrop for our case study of how the film can be used in the classroom and will be briefly introduced below.

Ford's (2010) recent work focuses on presenting a different account of leadership through a critical and psychosocial lens. She concludes that this critical approach highlights not only the contextual nature of leadership, which has been suggested by other authors (Fairhurst, 2009; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Liden & Antonakis, 2009; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006), but also the partiality of accounts that might still be considered as 'neo-liberal', in which all that is needed is for others to leave the leader-work to an individual alone, and so remain outside of and importantly 'above' the social dynamic. For example, Ford (2010: 50) highlights the *"...broad tendency for leadership research ...to focus exclusively on the top director or executive roles to portray the manager/leader as a superior being, uni-directionally interacting with subordinates"*. We argue that this neo-liberal approach has significant consequences for our understanding of leadership as it has led to a paucity of literature that questions the transcendental nature of the claims made in labelling a leader 'toxic'. Consequently, we support Ford's (2010: 62) call for *"...recognition that our sense of selves are not only entwined within the context and the situations in which they are performed, but also in the hegemonic discourses and culturally shaped narrative conventions that can be developed through a more critical and psychosocial approach."* It is this entwined nature of context, discourse and culture that we present to students, through the film *Batman: The Dark Knight*.

Secondly, we draw on relational leadership (e.g. Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) where leadership is seen as inter-subjective – *'as a way of being-in-relation-to-others'* (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1430) and recognises the importance of the relationship (Gergen, 2009) as opposed to the individual. Notions regarding 'toxic' (e.g. Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or 'bad' (e.g. Kellerman, 2004) leadership are arguably too focussed on the individual's responsibility (Knights and O'Leary, 2006), both from a leadership and followership perspective, downplaying the relational nature of ethical and value-based judgements of good and evil. We encourage students and

managers to discuss aspects of good and evil as they relate to specific sequences from the film. The final key influence from these critical approaches on our work with toxic leadership in a teaching and learning context is Ford and Harding's (2007) discussion of tools and techniques within critical management studies to explore leadership development programmes. They argue that leadership programmes particularly, as well as the culturally limited organizational leadership literature, generally (Calás & Smircich, 1991), invites participants to seduce themselves into the concept of leadership which in turn limits the range of possibilities of 'being' within that identity of leader. Similar to Ford and Harding (2007) we take the view that being 'critical' means seeking to challenge established patterns of thinking and action that takes on broader perspectives from the social sciences. Whilst Ford and Harding (2007) relate this theoretical approach to leadership development we use this approach to help challenge mainstream notions of toxic or bad leadership in the classroom and hence in practice, via cinematic means.

Toxic and Bad Leadership

Although writings on 'toxic' (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or 'bad' (Kellerman, 2004) leadership have brought a new perspective for understanding, studying and researching leadership, it continues to appear rigid, static and prescriptive. We point out to students that by taking a more social and relational view rather than a psychoanalytic perspective, provides a different lens on toxic and bad leadership. In some way Jean Lipman-Blumen and Barbara Kellerman are criticising the leadership literature within their work but there is still a tendency to form the critique in a functionalist way, rather than exploring inherent power imbalances, discursive or relational approaches. This literature has been developed along the lines of learning from what is seen as bad or unethical leadership practices, and a typical definition highlights distinct behaviors such as – *“Corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage, and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal, and criminal acts, are part of the poisonous repertoire of toxic leaders.”* (Lipman-Blumen, 2005: 18). Kellerman (2004) also adds, through the concept of bad leadership, that bad leaders can be *incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular and evil.*

Whilst the key focus of much of this literature is on understanding why followers are so susceptible to toxic leaders and to this end recognises that toxicity is subjective, changing and dependant on context (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), it fails to consider the very concept of toxicity. This literature represents a welcome

relief from the dominance of the positive heroic leadership focus that dominates the leadership literature (Collinson, 2012; Ford, 2010), however, paradoxically, it also remains firmly embedded within this stream—comparing the hero and the villain (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Kellerman, 2004). It is these criticisms of the theory that we illuminate by analysing specific sections from the film in class with students and managers using a critical approach that can help them feel and contemplate (embody) issues of toxicity and bad leadership in practice. *Batman: The Dark Knight* explores this process of intricate, subtly situated dichotomy which may be interpreted as good or bad, cognitively, imaginatively, intellectually, emotively and sensorially highlighting the socially constructed nature of leadership and the differing perspectives from which it is seen and felt. Through our exploration of *The Dark Knight* with students, we seek to give voice to other possible leadership identities and socially relative views of toxic, bad and good leadership. In doing so we enable students to challenge current accounts of toxic leadership, and even accounts of leadership in general, that adhere to functionalist understandings, through offering interpretations that draw on more discursive post-structural readings.

Taking Students through a Critical Reflection from *Batman: The Dark Knight*²

We argue that the above literature and critical discussion can be best represented to students and managers through the use of film analysis. In addition, our focus is also to enable students of management studies to further explore the possibilities for leadership research that film-based analyses can offer. Foreman and Thatchenkery (1996), for example, argue that the form and representational qualities of film (e.g. true to life, distorted, realistic) provide a unique approach to organization analysis, whilst Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) point out that the appeal of film-based working methods lies in their offering an important turn toward sensory experience and felt meanings to generate knowledge we rely and act on in social settings.

In addition, there are new approaches to management education and pedagogy that accommodate the more multi-media literate students of the digital age. For example, Oblinger and Oblinger (2005: 214) state “...many are fluent in personal expression using images; they are comfortable in an image-rich rather than text only environment”. Within our analysis we take note of the critical interrogation approach to films adopted by Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) and Tyler, Anderson and Tyler (2009). We develop this creative-arts based methodology further by highlighting how we use this format to take students through a more critical

² At this stage of the article we would recommend readers to view the clips we discuss below to enable an understanding of some of the power assumptions and relational influence to which we refer.

perspective; interpreting the emergence of a discourse around 'good' and 'bad' or 'virtue' and evil' within a particular film, *Batman: The Dark Knight*. This critical post-structuralist approach is much like the idea of studying 'leaderful moments' (Wood and Ladkin, 2008) through the lens of visual images and is an increasingly popular methodological approach in leadership research (e.g. Hansen & Bathhurst, 2011; Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Ropo, Parviainen & Koivunen, 2002). These qualitative methods typically derive data from photographs and film to observe – in both participant and non-participant formats – leadership in context. The discussion with students therefore moves away from accounts of leaders themselves, or even the dyadic behavior of leaders and followers, to concentrate more on 'frames of leadership' as an unfolding emergent process which gives a richer appreciation of the role played by context, culture, history, geography, and so on. It therefore sets out to take the idea of leadership going-on or happening 'in the moment' seriously and bids us to look on leadership as a sort of event (Wood, 2005).

There has been previous use of film to enable learning around subjects like leadership (e.g. Comer 2000; Islam, 2009; Harrington & Griffin, 1990; Warner, 2007) and film has been used as a methodology for investigating leadership (Komaki, 1998; Salovaara, 2014). We argue, however, as Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) did in relation to organization theory, that film analysis of leadership studies is under developed. Islam (2009) suggests that the use of film enables researchers to open up the relationships between leadership and the social organization. Furthermore, the use of film representation, in particular, shows a more complex and perhaps more subtle interpretation of leadership linked to toxicity (Billsberry & Edwards, 2008).

In our case we use the film as an iterative process of viewing, discussion and analysis with students studying for business and management degrees at a UK Business School. This method embraces the subjective nature of sense-making (Weick, 1995) as emergent themes are explored through a number of scenes that are perceived by the authors to be representative of the key arguments. We acknowledge that the subjective nature of sense-making may lead to both our readers and other viewers valuing different aspects of the chosen scenes, however, the theoretical framing is an attempt to ensure the analysis and subsequent conclusions are effectively expressed for students to then discuss and debate in class. Furthermore, as a leadership learning technique, the use of cinematic analogy and with it the constructionist process of interpretation and analysis may lend itself to an active exploration of the socially relative in our conceptualisations of good, bad and toxic leadership.

In discussion with students we explore the different power assumptions and agendas held by Batman and the Joker and their ensuing relationship. Batman can be seen as a leader within Gotham city (the bounded

environment in which the film plays out) who is imbued with power by the citizens and police to work on their behalf for the greater 'good' (i.e. standing up for citizens' rights and 'saving the city'). The Joker, on the other hand, has no 'legitimate authority' but rather forces his leadership authority onto the mafia (i.e. he can get them their money back, he also orchestrates bank robberies – so the other criminals are his followers). Furthermore, we can also see Batman and the Joker as followers of two different yet interconnected higher ideals. We could then interpret their relationship as one of leader-follower in which case they are leading and following each other. There are, therefore, various conceptualisations of 'leadership' within this film. For the purposes of this paper we explore the construction of these identities within certain scenes in the film to develop an understanding of the complexity of how toxic leadership is constructed. These scenes encourage debate from students and managers around the topic of toxic leadership (and the topic of leadership in general). We make the following observations regarding the use of the film in a classroom setting.

Examples of the use of Sequences from the Film

The Dark Knight begins with the introduction of the two main characters, Batman played by Christian Bale and his ultimate foe The Joker played by Heath Ledger. These initial scenes appear to serve to establish the characters as contrasting stereotypes juxtaposed for maximum dramatic effect. The Joker's screen debut in the opening scene sees him cleverly facilitating a bank robbery which ends in a carefully orchestrated inter-gang deception that leaves him the sole benefactor of the heist. Meanwhile Batman fights against copycats in an attempt to protect Gotham City from vigilantism. When showing this in class we highlight to students how, in essence, the characters are established as embodiments of 'good' and 'evil' often seen as the crux of effective storytelling (Howells, 1891; Gardner, 1978). We suggest to students that this is the emphasis explicitly taken by the toxic and bad leadership literature, discussed above, and to some extent, implicitly by the individualistic, psychology driven literature on leadership in general, where there are connotations of 'leaders' and 'leadership' being inherently good and characteristically heroic (e.g. Collinson, 2012). Toxic leadership attempts to address this implicit view of leadership being inherently 'good' by investigating leadership from a toxic or bad perspective. However, as discussed earlier, we argue that such pre-defined notions of good and evil are based on transcendental judgements that preclude the possibility of a socially constructed and relational understanding of the much more complex and subtle nature of leadership and toxicity. And it is this perspective of toxic leadership we can highlight to students when showing these film clips.

Furthermore and as the film progresses, the complexity of the characters becomes apparent and the definitive distinctions between good and evil are called into question. From the outset Bruce Wayne and The Joker are portrayed as dichotomous characters, yet Batman, once perceived to be the embodiment of 'good', is constructed as somewhere between good and evil. When the head of the mafia is arrested, a significant other member flees the US with the mafia's money, and is therefore out of US jurisdiction; the DA (District Attorney, Mr Harvey Dent) calls upon Batman for his help as he too is above the law, "*with no jurisdiction*" (scene 7). This significant line marks the beginning of the blurring between the previously uncrossed boundaries of good versus evil. We show students scene 23 in the film which highlights nicely the blurring of notions of good and bad and also the relational perspective of good and bad. Scene 23 is where Batman is interviewing/interrogating the Joker with "*no jurisdiction*". The Joker taunts Batman to the extent that Batman seemingly loses his temper (intemperance as would be described by Kellerman, 2004). We use this scene to exemplify the blurred nature of 'good' and 'bad' and the relational perspective of toxic and good leadership. For example, in scene 23, the following interchange occurs:

Batman: [interviewing The Joker] ...why do you want to kill me?

The Joker: [laughs] I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers...no, no...no...no...you...you complete me!

This extract demonstrates a relational perspective of the 'hero' and 'villain' storyline, whereby one appears not to be able to exist without the other and serves as a useful analogy for students to pick up on the relational nature of leadership as discussed by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011).

We also show students Scene 16 which is the police commissioner's funeral parade. The Joker attends the parade dressed as a police officer, at the height of the auspicious occasion he shoots Lt. Jim Gordon, a close associate of both the DA and Batman. This criminal act dissolves the order, tradition and ceremony of the occasion. The Joker's power lies in his lawless and 'irrational' behavior – he refuses to conform to the social norms of society typified by his unconventional appearance and inappropriate emotional reactions. He is beyond control; there is no logic, no rationale, he feeds on chaos and complexity and the power it commands him. He is not driven by money, power or adulation (demonstrated by him burning his share of the Mafia's money in scene 27). Yet, how much of this is true of Bruce Wayne or Batman? We question with students the extent to which this is true of organizational leaders? To what extent are the motives of leaders part of the

transcendental judgements made on whether they are 'toxic' or not. There is little doubt that Lipman-Bluman would have no problem in labelling The Joker a 'toxic leader' for his arsenal contains all of her identified acts of toxicity, yet labelling fails to take into consideration his reasoning. We suggest to students that toxic leadership theory focuses solely on the external manifestations of the leadership behavior and fails to consider the internal narrative that constitutes those behaviors. This scene also allows us to unpack further a relational view on toxicity as it highlights the extent to which individuals come to define themselves and their actions in light of societal norms and codes on good and bad. Yet it is these very norms and codes that can only exist through people's engagement with and construction of them. One cannot exist without the other.

The Joker himself sees this as neither toxic nor bad. Indeed, the film suggests that the Joker does not perceive himself to be 'toxic' – he sees his agenda to enlighten society to its blind faith in rules, bureaucracy, leadership and what society deems to be the legitimate 'good'. We highlight this to students and suggest that this is a core aspect of the film's critique. We explore with students the socially constructed nature of toxicity and discuss the influence that hegemonic discourses embedded in the leadership literature (Ford, 2010), organizations and wider society have on what we see as 'toxic' or 'bad' or 'good' and indeed who we recognise as leaders and toxic leaders.

Looking beyond the highly stylised presentations of what on the surface seems to be the hero and the villain (good versus evil); we begin to understand the more fundamental purpose of The Joker's character. His often dramatic and horrific acts are attempts to show people what they are really like. *"All you care about is money. This city deserves a better class of criminal. It's not about the money it's about sending a message"* (Scene 27). The Joker in this film, therefore, represents a metaphor embodying the relational approach to leadership suggesting that it is the desire to conform to social norms that makes leadership possible and has little to do with the agenda of the leader and more about feelings of inclusion and legitimation.

It is at this point that we can develop more critical notions of leadership with students. The Joker's demonstration of power highlights the toxicity of leadership and the bureaucratic authority that gives leaders legitimate power. In essence he is saying that all leadership due to conformity and followership is toxic because it skews our understanding and the way we make sense of ourselves, others and society. As followers, we stop questioning and challenging the norms. We become trapped in the *"hegemonic discourses and culturally shaped narrative conventions"* (Ford, 2010: 62) that dominate current thinking, literature, leadership learning and development practice. An additional thought, however, is that even when the Joker challenges norms and rules

he is creating new rules and norms through his actions. We pick this up with students and suggest that this resonates with a Weberian thinking (Weber, 1952, 1968) in that we may never be able to escape the 'iron cage' of society. Hence we may never escape the 'iron cage' of 'leadership' as a descriptive and/or normative term within organizations and society. It is these forms of discussion that we hold with students in a classroom setting and have found that this form of media representation is a useful format with which to challenge their thinking and develop a more critical commentary.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explained our use of the film *Batman: The Dark Knight* with students and managers to help them challenge the literature on toxic and bad leadership, which appears static and ingrained in hegemonic discourses. Whilst films never provide clear channels of communication showing us things as they really but are, by asking students and managers how they experienced and reflected upon what they saw happening, we can use specific sequences from the film to scrutinise evaluations of toxic leadership as they exist in the critical literature. Whereas current thinking on toxic leadership appears to assume a dichotomous position – you are either toxic/bad or not (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005) – using *Batman* as an illustration, we suggest there may be toxic elements to all leaders. In this sense, film analysis may be particularly useful for developing an understanding of toxicity and bad-ness in a leadership context, where it is important to embrace a more critical view to challenge the transcendental nature of the judgements made. Secondly, we have used the film to explore a more critical perspective on leadership which highlights the use of the term within organizational structures to ensure conformity and therefore could in itself be described as toxic. This resonates with the suggestion that leadership study needs to decouple itself from the managerial role and look towards a role of leadership resisting and potentially transforming structures of domination (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). Indeed, Ford (2010) has suggested that there is a broad tendency in leadership research and among practitioners to focus exclusively on the top management structure, the director or executive roles. This is with the purpose, she posits, of portraying the leader as a superior being, unidirectionally interacting with subordinates. Although Kellerman (2004) tries to present 'bad' leadership as an interaction between leaders and followers, we point out to students and managers that this lacks fluidity as the relational nature of leadership is not expressed in this account, or other accounts of 'toxic' leadership. As Ford (2010) goes on to suggest many leadership studies construct a view of a leader as omnipotent and

transcendental, she argues that this view must be challenged, as no one can be that leader. It is this view of, or search for, the 'perfect' leader that has been transferred into the 'toxic' and 'bad' leadership literature – bringing about the perfectly 'toxic' or 'bad' leader (or, indeed, follower as expressed by Kellerman, 2004). It is our contention that there is neither a perfectly 'bad' leader as much as there is a perfectly 'good' leader and that this is a useful message for students and managers to discuss and develop in the context of their leadership and management learning.

Finally, our exploration of the case of *Batman: the Dark Knight* has illustrated the potential usefulness of the cinematic analogy as a leadership development technique. A technique that allows active exploration of the socially relative nature of toxic, bad and good leadership through the socially embedded and co-constructed analysis and discussions involved in the exploration of how leadership is constructed in the film's narrative. In our discussions with students and managers we encourage them to relate these themes to examples from their own experience. This has proved extremely useful in relating the methodology to the reality of leadership in the working environment and enabling a sense-making process for leadership learning. We would encourage other HRD professionals and university teachers to use film to explore critical notions of leadership and in particular to use this example in their teaching and training work. We would welcome any feedback on how the exercise is used in class or in an executive setting.

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Gareth Edwards - Gareth is Associate Professor of Leadership Development at Bristol Business School, the University of the West of England, UK. His current interests are in the application of ideas on aesthetics and leadership, community and dispersed theories of leadership. He also researcher and writes on issues relating to leadership learning and development. He has published work in the journals *Leadership*, *Management Learning*, the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* and *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. He has also guest edited special issues in *Management Learning* and *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. Gareth is also on the editorial board of four journals, *Leadership*, *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, *Advances in Developing Human Resources* and the *International Journal of Public Sector Services*. Before entering academia Gareth spent twelve years working for a leadership and executive development company. Email Gareth3.edwards@uwe.ac.uk,

Doris Schedlitzki - Doris Schedlitzki is Associate Professor in Organizational Leadership at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England. Her research focus is on leadership and explores the areas of cross-cultural studies of leadership, discourse and leadership, leadership as identity, psychoanalytic

approaches to leadership and the role of national language within cultural leadership studies. Recent publications on the subject include articles in Leadership, Scandinavian Journal of Management and Management Learning as well as an edited book on Worldly Leadership (Palgrave) and a forthcoming textbook on Leadership (Sage). A secondary research interest is exploring the nature, purpose and use of blended learning approaches at postgraduate level. Doris has recently published an article on blended learning at postgraduate level in The International Journal of Management Education.

Jenna Ward is Senior Lecturer in Organizational Behavior at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. Dr Ward's research interests include emotional labour, emotive dissonance and self-identity, particularly in relation to workers on the margins. Her research has been published in Social Science and Medicine, Management Learning, Environment & Planning A and Human Relations. She is also co-director of the Art of Management & Organization. Email: jeward@dmu.ac.uk

Martin Wood is a Professor in the School of Management at RMIT University, Australia. He coordinates the Arts of Design and Management Research Cluster in the Centre for Sustainable Organizations and Work. In his scholarship, Martin pursues a philosophy of process, particularly the nexus among Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Alfred North Whitehead through a range of media and empirical domains. These include video making in field-based research projects and relational perspectives to understand leadership roles and performance. Email: martin.wood@rmit.edu.au