What do Claudio Ciborra and Sandro Botticelli have in common? On the renaissance of la Primavera

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Introduction

We like to remember Claudio Ciborra (1951–2005) as a postmodern nomad tirelessly meandering through the academic world, at all times leaving a permanent mark wherever he stayed. Amsterdam was no exception to this rule. Over the more than 15 years that we knew him, he was a visiting professor at the Department of Information Management, Faculty of Economics and Econometrics of the University of Amsterdam (nowadays University of Amsterdam Business School), a productive member of our PrimaVera research programme regularly contributing working papers and giving seminars, and an inspiring teacher in our postgraduate Executive Masters in Information Management programme. As important as his scientific contributions, we cherish the warm informal meetings we had as colleagues and friends, consistently avoiding Italian restaurants: 'Do you call this Italian food?'.

The PrimaVera research programme (http://primavera.fee.uva.nl) is at the heart of our endeavour in information management. Its outset and advance were incessantly challenged by Claudio: for us, Claudio Ciborra stood for Continuous Challenge (*and in his most masterly moments also for Constant Complainer*). In what follows, we briefly describe PrimaVera's major developments over the last decade related to Claudio's inspiration and its vital interaction with our educational programmes, in particular the Executive Masters in Information Management programme. From its very conception on PrimaVera found (and lost) in Claudio above all a Critical Companion.

PrimaVera's conception

Little short of a decade ago, PrimaVera (a rather stretched acronym for Programme in Information Management at the University of Amsterdam)

emerged from previous research on the business–IT relationship. Contrary to the predominant view of 'strategic alignment' (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993) and inspired by Claudio's relentless critique on the latter concept (as précised in Ciborra, 1997a), our perspective started from a double observation: (1) any contribution of IT to the 'busy-ness' of an organization is indirect, viz. through the information generated and/or the communication supported; and (2) the infrastructure is the linking pin par excellence between Henderson and Venkatraman's external (strategy) and internal (operations) domains. Both missing and, as a consequence, hardly understood constituents were considered vital to a clear and all-inclusive comprehension of the business–IT relationship (Abcouwer et al., 1997; Maes, 1998).

More decisively, our growing insights departed from the very essence of 'strategic business–IT alignment': alignment was not only found unproductive and even impossible, but equally detrimental to any innovative enterprise. The strategic alignment *model*, pretending purposiveness and therefore directiveness, was replaced by an extended *framework*, nothing more (or less) than a map for positioning business–IT issues of topical interest (as was recapitulated in Maes (2003b and 2005a)). It took several discussions – *and even more dinners* – to (partly?) persuade doubting Claudio of the non-mechanistic nature of our approach; after all, he was unconvinced, if not sceptical, about the value of formal models in IS (Ciborra, 1998). *Our recurrent and well-appreciated remark that 'all models are less than reality, except photo models who are more than reality' did a great job in this respect.*

In hindsight, PrimaVera started as an attempt to mingle Ciborra's deconstruction of managers' and consultants' too obvious assumptions such as strategic business–IT alignment, stringent management command and control, the supremacy of planned action, etc. with the fundamental day-to-day prerequisites of practitioners: reconstructing the world Claudio Ciborra was persistently and vigorously questioning.

Infrastructural and architectural thinking: dis-engineering information systems
Even before PrimaVera's conception, the notion of 'information infrastructure' was key in our research efforts. The previously stringently technical connotation of this concept was, from the very beginning, expanded on in order to encompass organizational and informational issues (Truijens et al., 1990). This vision was further broadened through interaction with Claudio (Ciborra, 1997b) and successfully introduced as one of the key concepts in our flagship curriculum, the Executive Masters in Information Management programme. Later on, the inherently unexpected outcomes and side effects of infrastructure development as exposed in From Control to Drift (Ciborra & Associates, 2000) brought even more bewilderment to the participants of this programme, despite the fact that Actor Network Theory was discovered as a prolific tool for the dynamic

interpretation of information infrastructures (Beyer & Maes, 2005).

A related, yet distinct concept appeared to be similarly central to PrimaVera: (corporate) information architecture, a theme not dealt with by Claudio (the only exception, to our knowledge, being some minor remarks in chapter 7 of Ciborra (2002)). In our continuing attempt to reconcile organizational stubbornness, as plainly unravelled and nourished by Claudio, with organizational effectiveness, information architecture is investigated as the outstanding concept to give guidance to organizational change (Winterink & Truijens, 2003). At the same time, and influenced by Claudio's deconstruction of various related concepts, we unveil information architectures in use as technology-dominated structures implicating additional complexity (instead of reducing complexity), instruments of organizational power (as they establish regimes of truth) and disembodied virtuality (as information systems are in reality never built under architecture); information architectures appear to be politically significant, yet communicatively impeding. We reconstruct the concept as the space to be filled between structure and communication on the one hand and between meaning and action on the other; to this end, we liberally go back to the postmodern philosophy of (building) architecture (Maes & Bryant, 2005). *This reminds us of Claudio's comments on the hotel Botticelli we once booked for him in Maastricht, being a remake of an Italian palazzo: 'Gentlemen, your hotel is very postmodern, but not authentic'. After which he was refused access to the hotel…*

From information and communication to meaning and identity
Claudio's organic view on the business–IT relationship led to envisioning this relationship in hitherto unfamiliar terms such as bricolage, tinkering, cultivation, moods, hospitality, etc. (as summed up in Ciborra, 2004). A peculiar aspect of his vision was that he never elaborated on the nature of 'information' as such; the subtitle of 'The Labyrinths of Information' is for good reason 'Challenging the Wisdom of Systems' (Ciborra, 2002). Conversely, a basic premise of PrimaVera is that the business–IT relationship can only be understood through the explicit formulation and investigation of the (technology independent) information and communication factor. This focus enabled us, for example, to differentiate the genuine CIO, first and foremost being a business information manager, from the traditional CIO, too often being a CTO in disguise (Maes, 2005a).

On the other hand, our continued investigation of information and communication led us back to Claudio's visionary interpretations of what is germane in the business–IT relationship. This journey brought us first to the exploration of the subjectivistic, interpretative view on information and communication related to phenomena such as sense making, interpretation differ-

ences among people as a critical source of innovation and learning, the creation of meaning, social networks and true belonging (Dirksen *et al.*, 2005), etc., all denying the engineerability of organizational reality and the conclusiveness of management control. Ongoing research, previewed in Maes (2005b), builds on these insights by relating information and communication to the (construction of) identity of an organization. This PrimaVera research subarea, dealing with the social construction of information and, for example, emphasizing in practice the proper organizational use of information above the IT-generated production of more information, is complementary to the social construction of IT in general (Ciborra, 2004) and to identity building vis-à-vis IT in particular (Ciborra, 2002: 112 and 128).

Looking through Armani glasses: reflective learning-by-sharing

Ask random participants of our Executive Masters in Information Management programme about Claudio, and they will spontaneously bring up 'Armani glasses': the metaphor Claudio used to draw on to introduce his data/decision making/transaction/learning views on information systems (Ciborra, 1993, pp. 111–114). However, they will also recall Claudio's unorthodox teaching style, his now and then caustic humour and above all his vision on learning, inspired by Argyris and Schön.

From its very beginning, the EMIM programme was aiming at 'reflective practitioners': professionals who 'think in action' and 'learn by doing' (Schön, 1979); through shared reflection on past experiences, they can take responsibility for their acts and their lives. Open-mindedness and vulnerability are key to this type of intensive learning; the EMIM programme attempts to provide a low-risk environment for intensive dialogue, where artistry, improvisation and problem-framing, terms all dear to Claudio, lead to learning as personal transformation.

Unlike traditional business schools, where executive teaching is commonly considered as an inconvenient diversion from serious research, we advocate the mutual interaction of both learning practices (Maes, 2003a). To this end, we developed the learning-by-sharing approach, where teachers, researchers, students and practitioners alike engage in a common learning effort, gradually exchange their fading distinct roles and build a reflective learning community (Thijssen *et al.*, 2002 ; Huizing *et al.*, 2005). We believe from conviction that the insight of reflectiveness being an integral part of an integral life is a cornerstone of Claudio's heritage.

Leaving our own comfort zone

Relevant research in information systems and information management should relate to the fundamental problems organizations are facing and deviate from beaten tracks. Claudio's research was disruptive, questioning accepted beliefs and anything that goes without saying. We believe that researchers in our field should be ready to leave their own sterile comfort zone, as we try to prove with PrimaVera. It is our intention to do so by investigating information management at the interorganizational and societal level and by reinforcing our multidisciplinary approach.

With information and IT more and more shaping the relationships between organizations and the actual identity of a dematerializing society, time has arisen to study information systems and information management at the appropriate interorganizational and societal level and to consider, for example, information management at the level of a single organization as just one instance of a much broader reality (Maes, 2005a). This was also the approach taken by Claudio in one of his last papers, dealing with the interaction of IT and good governance in a developing country (Ciborra & Navarra, 2005).

The fundamental problems we are confronted with can only be tackled through multidisciplinary research across the borders of traditional academic disciplines, because it is on these borders that genuine innovations occur. Claudio balanced on borders and sought inspiration in art, philosophy, religion, music, etc., thereby deliberately taking risks and provoking surprise if not astonishment; his last PrimaVera seminar, in the beginning of 2004 on 'The Mind or the Heart? It Depends on the (Definition of) Situation', treated one of Saint Paul's letters to the Romans as case study. Similarly, our treatise of information architecture by heavily relying on the philosophy of architecture (Maes & Bryant, 2005; Truijens, 2005) and our intention to organize a workshop in the Executive Masters in Information Management programme, where participants are asked to develop a corporate information architecture with real architects as coach and supervisor, are examples of how we try to cross academic and other borders in search of innovative and generative thinking.

Conclusion

With Claudio Ciborra as our Critical Companion, PrimaVera and its twin Executive Master in Information Management programme survived as nomadic adventures without predefined final destination *and even without restful accommodation along the road, as the manager of our university hotel so often reminded us: 'For God's sake, can you tell Mr. Ciborra we'll call him daily at 6 PM to list his complaints, but please ask him to stop calling the reception desk at every hour of the day and the night'.* Sleep well, Claudio!

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