

# Tidsstudiemannen - Le Chronométréur

## *Unplugged* - Book review essay

Pär THÖRN (2008), Stockholm: Modernista.

French translation:

Pär THÖRN (2017), Meudon: Quidam éditeur/

reviewed by

Emilie REINHOLD  
Stockholm Business School  
Stockholm University  
emilie.reinhold@sbs.su.se

Tommy JENSEN  
Stockholm Business School  
Stockholm University  
tommy.jensen@sbs.su.se

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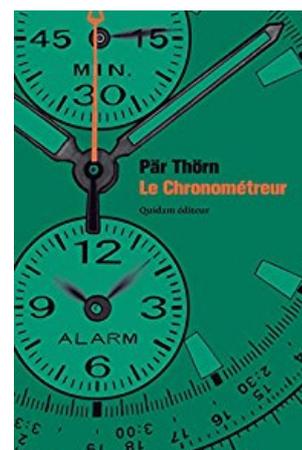


Paperback: 124 pages  
Publisher: Quidam (2017)

Pär Thörn is a sound artist, performance artist and avant-garde poet. Writing prose, he is attracted to absurdism, and has, as Charles Bukowski, worked as a postman. To this date, he has published 21 different written works, and has by one of the large morning papers in Sweden been called the most important contemporary Swedish writer (the Swedish section of Wikipedia). We were aware of none of this before reading this book. We suspect that many readers would assess this book as rather narrow or even absurd. But to us, scholars of organizations, it comes across as rather realistic, boundary breaking and imaginative.

The book is primarily about time-keeping as indicated by the original title *Tidstudiemannen* – the time and motion man. It is a short book (107 pages), and the number of words are few. Almost no page is filled but the prose is dense, each word has been carefully weighted. Therefore, we would like to signal to those who read Swedish and French that this book requires slow, focused, and imaginative reading.

Pär Thörn succeeds to craft a story that is immensely rich in aspects, angles, or perspectives on time in relation to life, world, and most importantly organizations and management. It is the story of a rather anonymous man's career as time and motion specialist in an ordinary organization. His whole life is devoted to the measurement of his and others' time and we follow his doubts as he investigates the right angle (for him) to stand behind employees to be able to teach them optimum ways of handling machines; as he tries to distinguish the micro-break from the real break; as he measures his own gestures, for example while eating a hot-



dog. He has no free time and no character other than being a professional in time-analysis and in time-keeping. Workers express their disgust and hatred through letters and ultimately sabotage of his precious time, when they steal furniture and office accessories from his office, leading to a costly investigation.

Even though the main character of this story is quite anonymous and greyish kind of character (could it be expected otherwise?), you easily imagine the agony as well as the (drying out) passion for time and work that he is going through. The writing style with its repetitions and accumulations also reflects the passing of time on our bodies: "Years years years add on years years years."

The red thread of the story is time itself and all its contradictory aspects, precise and floating, subjective and universal, frightening and reassuring, and, maybe above all, its (vague) cause/effect-relatedness to places/spaces. There is a striking contrast between linear time as studied and performed by management and the multi-ordered aspects of time as experienced by humans populating the world, and as affected by the world and all materia on [it](#). No matter how much the time and motion man becomes an expert in analyzing and measuring time, at the end time will get him and kill his miserable body.

At the first page the reader is informed that the "I" of the story has at time of birth a calculated life span of 73 years. At the third last page our story's "I" dies, 12.14 to be exact, nine years, 302 days, and 22 hours earlier than calculated. In between these pages, the calculation regularly changes, but our "I", the time and motion man, regularly attempts at measuring his lifespan. But time in a bodily sense is circumstantial within a developing (or rather degrading) biological time frame. When our time and motion man realizes that his devoted faith to time as explainable, controllable and manageable, viewed from a historical, geological or divine perspective, is futile and meaningless, it is then that he dies, and his latest calculations suggest that death was premature.

Time is elusive. Even if the organization, its management, its organizational members, its time and motion men, were utterly devoted to explaining, controlling and managing time, it is impossible. This story reveals why and as little as total institutions can arrest humanity can organizations "escape" or "circumvent" time. This is, we believe, the main selling point for why students of organizations should read it – the more time is attempted to be tamed, ordered, structured, simplified, routinized, etc., i.e. managed, the more it 'hits back' at the organization's capabilities to organize. This is because excessive management of time leads to dehumanization.

Of course, this story need not be limited to dehumanization. What about ecology and its connection to excessive management of time? Take this example: Corporations are in their accounting principles accounted for as "going concerns" – operating indefinitely. Or take this example: Institutions, this notably slippery phenomenon, are they not also perceived as eternal precisely because organization theory and management fail to explain why and how institutions are born, how they progress and decline, and then die?

Contrary to the story's "I", letting go of eternity (as in going concern) is far from futile. All eternal (social) constructions are a perversion, as viewed from human cells to the universe. Eternity gives the false worldview that organizational life span is related to a negotiable "environment". The organization needs to trade (and process) energy – input (throughput) and output – with its surrounding environment, and thus different energies are viewed as exchangeable (e.g. money is

exchangeable to trees, water etc.). Add to eternal the component of growth; perhaps most naturalized in small start-ups (and the economy) and most feared in bureaucracies.

But seasons come and go, the sun rise and set, and maybe entirely different universes come and go – for sure time and motion men come and go. Much could be ecologically achieved if eternal and growth could be replaced by cyclic and balance (as in a sinus curve). Our time and motion man has glimpses of realizing this cyclical and balancing aspect, but refrains from this in horror and boredom. He flees back to the eternal, and his belief in ever-growing efficiency and productivity.

It is only after “I” has died that Thörn concludes that in every other thinkable aspect, besides our time and motion man’s death, everything is as usual. Still counting, the year sees 1.028 newborn humans, 90.532 humans dies, 193 books in literary science are published, etc. But stating that everything is as usual, and will continue to be as usual, would, of course, be fatalistically absurd if done outside this book’s story (the survival of humanity and of animals and plants are a real stake. We cannot count on business as usual.) Yet, if read by students of organizations the reward will be a great imaginary on organizations and time, and on humans and time; an imaginary that we are convinced is needed if to be able to perform critical research (on for example dehumanization, or ecological devastation).

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