

**Breaking Out of Narrative's Prison:
Improper Story in Storytelling Organization**
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ABSTRACT

When story is released from the prison of narrative, we learn the complexity of story is astounding. Narrativists confine story to a chronology with linear-plot, a cohesive telling with beginning, middle, and end. If we release story from narrative's prison, then especially in organizations, there is complex storytelling systemicity that I call "*storytelling organization*." This essay explores the ways story in *storytelling organizations* can leave reductionist narrative shackles behind. I do this by reviewing *storytelling organization* research on (Goldco) an office supply company, Disney, Nike, Enron, and McDonald's. The contribution is a theory of story that works well with strategy, leadership, and complexity ways of telling and retelling in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Let me put the charges boldly. Traditional folklore and narratology, in the main, since Aristotle (350 BCE) define story too narrowly as cohesive telling linear-plot, complete with beginning, middle, and end. Narrative requires story to be a *proper* "imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude... Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end" the definition of coherent narrative (Aristotle, 350 BCE: 1450b: 25, p. 233).

These "proper" linear-story-plots are important, yet exceedingly rare in organizations. Such an approach does facilitate story comparison of poetic-plot types (frameworks of tragic, comedic, romantic, & satiric), or motif-indexing. It allows "proper" story collection building, but linear-plot is only one narrow kind of story, and fails to consider the dynamic complexity emergence and social production of "improper" fragment-stories, nor the distributive collective systemic qualities in what I call "*storytelling organizations*" (Boje, 1991, 1995). I assert we need to study both the proper-narrative and the improper story, and how these dance together if we are to escape narrative's prison. I hope this article will fuel conversation on how to understand story in social organization, as higher order complexity than narrative.

Let's look at the prison rules. Then we will look beyond to find frontier of storytelling organization research and consulting.

Prison Rules I have this ongoing debate with two organization folklore narrativists: Yannis Gabriel and Barbara Czarniawska. First, Gabriel (2000: 19-21) says my tersely told "you know the story" is a "narrative deskilling," not a "proper" story, with plot, preventing full collections being built in management, as they are in his version of "organization folklore." I say "his version" because, I too study story from "organization folklore," but instead of story-collecting, I observe storying behaviors *in situ* in organizing contexts. Gabriel (2000:20) charges that I lost something in my inquiry (Boje, 1991) by concluding story is mostly tersely-coded, fragmented, and emergent co-constructed phenomenon in organizations:

One suspects that Boje is driven to this conclusion because his commitment to viewing organizations as storytelling systems does not square with the anaemic quality of the stories he collected. Yet, in taking this extreme position (and the strength of Boje's argument lies in its extremism), Boje loses the very qualities that he cherishes in stories, performativity, memorableness, ingenuity, and symbolism.

I disagree with the last sentence, but want to move beyond he's right; I'm wrong argumentation (or vice versa).

Like Gabriel, Czarniawska initially privileged the received folkloric and narratology position of "*proper*" narrative-plot linearity and wholeness-cohesion, discounting the terse, fragmenting, and polyphonic complex "*manner*" of story. For example, "A story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem" (Czarniawska, 1997: 78); elsewhere, "For them to become a narrative, they [stories] require a plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole" (1999: 2, addition mine).

Recently, Czarniawska relaxed her "proper story" restriction that story submit to narrative-plot; she admits a wider variety of forms, and summarizes my 1991 study differently than Gabriel; "Boje" found "storytelling in contemporary organizations hardly follows the traditional pattern of a narrator telling a story from the beginning to end in front of an enchanted and attentive audience" (Czarniawska, 2004: 38); yet she still looks at story as only "narrative performance." Czarniawska's (2004 38) did develop the idea

of “petrified story,” a reaction to an accusation that my colleagues I made that narrative researchers were apt to treat stories as found artifacts; she put it this way “... every narrative becomes new with each retelling, and the ‘petrification’ of stories is not the result of the myopia of the researcher but of intense stabilizing work by the narrators” in organizations.” I still contend that while there are a few stories that narrativity petrifies, these are rare, and one is well advised to also be studying the more “improper” less linear stories, and more to the point, study *systemicity* of story-dialogicality behaviors of people in organizations, in relationship to more petrified narrative-coherence behaviors.

Systemicity Boulding (1956) posited nine levels of system complexity, revised by my mentor Pondy (1976). I define the word “*systemicity*” to denote the top three orders of system-complexity (7. symbol-processing, 8. social organization, & 9. transcendent). It is here that story has power, that the dialogical power defies narrative. The first five levels (1. frameworks, 2. clockworks, 3. control-thermostat, 4. cell/open-system), & 5 organic-plant) have become master-narratives, each with a metaphorization (or trope) that imprisons story. For example, “A whole is called ‘mechanical’ when its constituent elements are united in space and time by some external connection and are not imbued with an ‘internal unity of meaning’” (Bakhtin, 1990: 1).

My contribution is to go beyond narrative, to the more “polyphonic manner of story” (Bakhtin, 1981: 60). I theorize story as different in complexity from (level 1 to 5) master-narratives, as dialogic, not only polyphonic-dialogicality in manner, but as I will explore in this article, multi-stylistic, multi-chronotopic, and architectonically dialogic. Boulding (1956) is quite clear, that the less complex levels of system thinking are fixed on an information-processing model that is “sign” based, while level 6 is image (historicity) differentiates from sign-representation; level 7 is more complex order of languaged-symbolism (including self-reflexivity); level 8 is social organization (i.e. societal discourse); and level 9 is *transcendence* (defined as relation of unknowable to what we think we know). As Pondy explained it to me when I was his pupil, the open system (level 4) does not attend to “self-awareness” or “use of language,” (Pondy, 1976: 9, 1978). There is processing of narratives of the environment, but only at level of sorting, counting, not generating differentiated image-management or image-story in acts of self-reflexivity, or proactively manipulating societal discourse.

What is exciting about Boulding and Pondy's work, is that it is not a "framework" typology of independent level properties--- it is *not* succession; rather as systems become more complex, the emergent property, at a given level, is dialogically interactive with the level-properties at lower orders of complexity. For example, if organizations are level 9 (transcendence), then that way of storying is dialogic to properties such as (8) societal discourse, (7) symbolic, (6) image, and the five master-narratives (levels 1 to 5). It means that becoming an open system (level 4) does not rid one of mechanistic narrative, nor does more organic level 5 leave open system behind, etc.

To develop the dialogic manner of story complexity, the Boulding/Pondy model needs a radical revision. There is in Dostoevsky polyphonic-novels a "destruction of the organic unity of materials" yet the lower-order complexity of narrative metaphorizations *is* still in force (Bakhtin, 1973: 11). Bakhtin (1973: 4) explored how Dostoyevsky's novels were marked by "the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices." Holquist and Liapunov in their introduction, summarize Bakhtin's (1990) languaged approach, how "wholes are not *given*, but always *achieved*: [the] work – the struggle to effect a whole out of the potential chaos of parts" (p. xxiii). Bakhtin (1990: 276) refers to a "yet-to-be accomplished systematic unity." It is the "unfinalizedness [in] its open-endedness and indeterminacy" (Bakhtin, 1973: 43) beyond mechanistic, open, and organic systems that I call *systematicity* at the levels of (6) image, (7) symbol, (8) social discourse, and (9) transcendence, that I think is the unmerged and unfinalized dialogic-complexity that gives rise to "the polyphonic manner of the story" (Bakhtin, 1973: 60).¹ In short, *systematicity is defined as a languaged dialogized-complexity, and work-in-process, not a completed or merged whole.*

It is in *systemicity* not fully accomplished; wholes unfinalized, and chaotic parts in unmergedness that the polyphonic (& other dialogism of) story flourishes. Systemicity keeps our focus on what is unorganized, without either mechanistic or organic narrative-

¹ More accurately, the polyphonic dialogicality of story emerges somewhat in level 5; the stylistic 6, chronotopic in 7, architectonic societal discourse in 8, and what I will call "polyphi", or the transcendence of discourses of all these orders of dialogism; Explication of the full model is beyond scope of this article; it is the basis of book I am writing for Sage (London), the draft of which is available at <http://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/690>

structure, and what is unfinished, underdeveloped, unbounded, unplotted, even transcendent. I think there are several types of systemicity. First, the undecipherable, undefined, undetected, unbeknown, unexplored, and unconscious underground of systemicity. Second the unmerged, unorganized, unformed and unfederated regions of systemicity. Third, the unending, unfinished, unraveling, unachieved, unaccomplished areas of systemicity. Finally, in terms of story there is unuttered, unvoiced, unspoken, and untold systemicity. I think the key to understanding systemicity is to look at acts of *consummation*, at how the unsculptured and unshaped is being willed into being, and how any achieved wholeness becomes unmerged and unfinalized as consummation unravels (Bakhtin, 1990).

Behaviors of Storytellers I will tell you a story so you might understand how I became so brazen as to unthroned folkloric narrative, and prefer story systemicity to whole in mechanistic-organic or even open system thinking.

While teaching at UCLA's management school (1978-1986), I began sneaking off with the Folklore and Mythology faculty and doctoral students; they were tucked away behind the library of the Anderson School of Management. Professors Georges and Jones, for example, were pioneering a new approach called "organization folklore," a rebellion against traditional obsession with collecting fairytales, Native American coyote tales, and working-folk-stories, and then meticulously classifying them with motif-index, or showing how mythemes migrated with population from old world to new.

Something was being missed. Organization folklorists weren't looking at the *behavior of people* telling stories in organizations. That sounds simple enough, and I am not saying it was never done, only that the narrow definitions of story-must-be-narrative-plot put blinders on researchers being able to see systemicity complexity of story behaviors.

Jones, Guiliano, and myself, on Mar 10th 1983 assembled the new breed of organization folklorist to meet with management researchers, consultants, and a few corporate and government executives in a conference dubbed, "*Myth, Symbols & Folklore: Expanding the Analysis of Organizations*" (Jones, Boje, & Guiliano, 1983).

Organization folklorists distrusted the intentions of management writers such as Tom Peters, who shackled story into a tool, a stump speech, linear-narrative to motivate

workers; sheer dribble from the new folklorist perspective. They did not take to executives either; folklorists were used to studying story behaviors of workers, crafts-people that sang songs and joked about the tyranny of managers. So management professors put up slides about story-plot collections, and folklorists thought the use of slides to convey story-skeleton-abstracts was just weird.

I was also working with Harold Garfinkel, the ethnomethodologist who worked with our psychiatric group at UCLA Medical School; they studied how retarded children were able to accomplish story in groups. Researchers were excited about conversation analyst, Harvey Sack's (1972) story prompting, turn-taking, etc. Garfinkel visited my story ethnography course in the Management School, and did remark that if retarded children had story behaviors, then maybe adults working in organizations did too. Garfinkel, they say, trained Carols Castaneda, and was inspiration for Don Juan.

OK, you may know my story. I did not make tenure at UCLA, the dean it seems was unimpressed by the first ever meeting of organization folklorists with management types; he wanted to convert *Folklore and Mythology* office space into space for the Management School (Boje, 1997). I fell off the academic radar screen and wound up at Loyola Marymount in 1988; decided to give it another go.

Goldco Storytelling Organization I had to make my come back, so I headed for the field with tape recorder and notebook, did a year of participant-observer work at an office supply company, I called "Goldco" and managed to publish the study in lofty *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Boje, 1991). I focused on studying *story behaviors* in conversations. I did record over 100 hours of spontaneous conversation, and supplemented that with more hours of interviews with about everyone, and reading every annual or other report I could lay my hands on. I did my tape-transcribing each day, and did not pile it up, hoping to analyze it at the end (delay is big mistake I learned the hard way while at UCLA). It took over 600 hours to transcribe it all.

Two months into the study, I called a doctoral student at UCLA Folklore and Mythology who'd taken my story ethnography class: "Mimi [Bard]" I said, "It's weird, I have all these transcripts and I can not find a full-blown story. It's like they don't have time to tell the full story or don't have to, because they assume listeners know it already..." Mimi interrupted, "David, there are stories here; you can see the story

prompting behaviors, like Garfinkel [& Sacks] talked about.” And then, it was clear, there were story behaviors, but highly “improper” ones, more anemic than those of children.

The whole organization is an unfinalized systemicity of proper and improper-storytelling, with a diverse multi-stylistic dialogicality of story expression (oral, written, gesture, & architectural) that goes beyond the narrow possibilities envisioned by traditional folklore/narrative. If we set aside folklore/narrativists’ story prison (i.e. story must have plot; coherence of beginning, middle & end), then the complexity of story behavior is astonishing.

I composed a broader definition, *story* defined “as an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged” (Boje, 1991: 111). It was the “referencing” that is critical in this definition; it gets at the *intertextuality* (words and sentences of one story reference & answer story fragments at other times & places). Pre-story can be in search of a plot, or people presenting so many plots, that ‘whodunit’ is hard to figure out (Boje & Rosile, 2002). A story can begin as an impulse in the middle; story can emerge in widely distributed fragments without endings, without being assembled into coherent-singular-performance, in simultaneous partial tellings people can twist and turn bits every which way, and people in separate offices, walking hallways, in vehicles, and in some restaurant can be referencing some unfolding story quite differently.

The Goldco study allowed me to theorize the entire systemicity of storytelling of the organization in what I called “storytelling organization.” *Storytelling organization* is defined as “a collective system[icity] in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (Boje, 1991: 106). Storytelling organization “systemicity,” unlike mechanical, open, or organic system-wholeness, is never quite accomplished, rather riddled with partial tellings, story-starting and stopping behaviors, referencing intertextual in-betweenness, gaps, pauses, assumed agreements about story-wholeness that rarely get checked out.

People tell story tersely, in code, and expect others, such as newcomers, to fill in silences, and read between the lines. Tellers would turn to me, and say “you know the

story” about the ‘couch,’ and I was expected to know that the “couch” references the CEO’s new leather couch, the site of interrupted sexual encounter between the VP of marketing and the sales manager; it is a story, only those in the know, know about (Boje,1991). My colleagues Gephart (1991), Boyce (1995), Kaye (1996) did research and consult extending my theory of *storytelling organization*. Boje, Luhman, & Baack (1999) looked at power-relations between storytelling organizations.

The main findings: people who work together, in storytelling organizations, may tell story succinctly without plot or linear-coherence, expecting listeners acquainted with recurring themes, to just fill in the blanks. For example, using some terse code, like the police who share stories of the evening watch using numbers, “code 357” interjecting a line here or there to stress a nuance, “the *perp* locked herself in the vault.” I think even a phrase like “you know the story” can be a tersely-told story between those working together who know the context; sometimes just a nod of the head will tell the story.

In sum, I reassert, narrative is just too deadening; Storying is active; the story unfolds in fragments, as people contribute their two cents worth of experience or speculation; so the storytelling organization systemicity has a very different dynamic than one would expect if one confined inquiry to collecting “proper story” performances.

Disney Storytelling Organization I proposed a wrinkle to the *storytelling organization* theory in a study of Disney; that wrinkle is *Tamara* (Boje, 1995, 2000a, 2005e).

How is Disney *Tamara-land*? The official Disney stories of Walt’s leadership, and even who invented Mickey Mouse are opposed by counter-stories being told in other Disney rooms, and by tellers outside Disney’s empire. These counter-stories do not make their way into official Walt biographies, or official history. It is the dialogic (heteroglossic) opposition of continually sorting, resorting official linear-narratives, the emergence of rival antenarratives, and the restorying of official-image by more marginalized whirlwind of counterstory that constitutes a dynamic-systemicity of the

storytelling organization.² But, what previous research failed to recognize was the exact complexity of systemicity of storytelling organization.

First, previous research did not attend to the complexity-systemicity of the landscape. Aristotle (350 BCE/1954, 1459b, p. 5) for example noted that in epic-story theatre “a number of parts[are] going on simultaneously.” *Tamara* is a postmodern play, taking place in a mansion, a landscape of story co-production, distributed across *simultaneous* performance sites, where chasing storylines means networking with actors and spectators; most important, people in the same time and place can experience story differently because they arrive from different tellings in other places, and no one is everywhere at once; therefore the systemicity contextualizes story meaning.

Second, the systemicity is on-going uncompletedness, ever changing, rearranging, and unfolding. In Walt’s day it was one studio and one theme park; now Disney-*Tamara* is complex, sophisticated, highly diversified storytelling organization: opening a fifth theme park, as well as everything from a cruise line, stores in malls and airports, R-rated Touchstone movies, ABC TV, and investments in hotels, and even a utopian community called “Celebration” where people live the Disneyfied-magic of mid-western lifestyle. Add to this the complexity of contemporary Disney not being able to conceptions of family values that religious groups charge Eisner did not sustain taking over Walt’s empire (Boje, 2000a).

Third, the front-stage *image* of the corporation (level 6) unravels with the emergence of the backstage (somewhat gossipy) counterstories. A new book, *DisneyWar*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist James Stewart (2005) alleges that new-CEO Bob Iger's poor judgment, his tendency to kowtow to out-going CEO Michael Eisner is a problem. Articles in *Fortune*, amplify on some of Stewart’s charges that Iger, was not revered by Eisner, who said of him: "He is not an enlighten [*sic*] or brilliantly creative man, but with a strong board, he absolutely could do the job." Eisner adds: "I bought into the cliché of Bob—that because he didn't get on top of the table and rant and rave and act like a fool, he wasn't a creative, passionate person."¹ Disney storytelling organization has

² *Antenarrative* is defined as “bet” that a “prestory” that is mere fragment, not-whole, can be transformative of full-blown narrative coherence; the concept was introduced in Boje (2001), and was to be the title of the book, but publisher’s will won out.

years of practice. The point here is the simultaneity of story in *Tamara*, is interactive with uncompleted *systemicity*, and this third property of unraveling image-management.

Nike Storytelling Organization I did a series of articles on Nike's storytelling organization (Boje, 1999a, b, 2000b, c, 2001: 67-72, 79-91). Nike is a complex *storytelling organization* constructing through story behaviors its corporate-legitimacy to subcontract to factories that have been accused by activists of exploiting young women in sweatshops. You probably know that Nike skillfully stories itself as a champion of women and minorities with re-cycled inner-city slogans like "just do it," images of successful minority athletes such as Michael Jordan, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Tiger Woods. You may know that counter-stories by many activists and journalists have pressured Nike into improving contracting practices.

Storytelling organization persists in an environment of other storytelling organizations; for Nike, this is media storytelling organizations, union and consumer activist storytelling organizations, as well as monitoring, accounting, and consulting storytelling organizations. This is a network of storytelling organizations that "circulate and spin stories to influence one another" in ways that constitute a more macro systematicity (Boje, 2001: 70). Nike storytelling organization does story assemblage, in the face of activist story-disassemblage

For example, Nike can construct press releases to answer a deficiency found by its monitoring agent, the Fair Labor Association (FLA). The mainstream media organizations spin the deficient working condition story differently in answer to Nike and FLA reports. Activist groups such as Clean Clothes Campaign, Sweatshop Watch, Corporate Watch, etc. tell a story to deconstruct Nike and FLA's portrayal of working conditions. Official Nike stories are opposed by dozens of counter-stories of exposé journalists and publishers (i.e. Adbusters), activists (e.g. Jeff Ballinger, Thuyen Nguyen) and academic-activists (i.e. Nancy Landrum, Anita Chan, Victoria Carty, Cheryl Cole...)³

The moves and counter-moves of the dialogic-network (level 8) of storytelling organizations make the systematicity dynamics exceedingly complex. Narrative is still in play, each posits its 'proper' chronology, and there is a proliferation of counterstory, that

³ For a listing of 106 Nike studies see <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/AA/academicsstudyingwriting.htm>

deconstructs the other's petrified narrative; these strong plots mingle with weaker (antenarrative) pre-stories and terse tellings to collectively constitute an epic-story landscape, a veritable *Tamara-land* where any purported whole-story unravels, and such petrification is short-lived.

Each storytelling organization tells stories for workers, putting their respective spins out there; worker's storying is indirect, mediated by the various storytelling organizations; each giving primacy to their commentary to embellish any quotes abstracted from workers; it is what Bakhtin (1973, 1981) calls double-voiced narration (workers voice, plus voicing of some organization's interpretive commentary). The result is a complex, dynamic systemicity of storytelling organizations riddled with "polysemy dynamism" (many meaning that are intertextual). The polyphonic (multi-voice, multi-logic) production, distribution and consumption of stories by multiple storytelling organizations construct dynamic systemicity that is undecipherable by static analysis of traditional folkloric or narrative methodology (Boje, 2001: 79).

You may not know that Nike has a 'war room' of public relation talent traveling to universities and academic conferences, working to coalescing official ways to story Nike, and any bad news of its 700 plus contract factories making sneakers and apparel. Nike activists have their own war rooms, seeking to unravel Nike's dominant ideology of entrepreneurial global capitalism success stories.

Nike is like the character Wile E. Coyote, forever using virtual and other trickster technology purchased from the Acme Company to trap the Roadrunner-activist (Boje, 1999b). Like Wile, the deceptive means backfire, triggering chance chaos events, releasing Roadrunner, while Wile becomes the inevitable chaos victim. The inevitable result is coming, yet Wile Nike keeps going back to Acme to buy another PR campaign, another celebrity study (e.g. former UN Ambassador Andrew Young), or another academic's study (e.g. Amos Tuck).

Lately Wile-Nike is winning the race with the flock of Roadrunner activists unable to trigger more chaos. About five years ago, Nike hired highly professional staff for its war room, such as Maria Eitel (from Microsoft), and funded its own monitoring agency (FLA). The result is Nike controls the "shock effect" when FLA finds a few sweatshop conditions in a subcontract factory. The two *storytelling organizations* (Nike

& FLA) have reversed the characterizations: Nike is now Roadrunner and Wile represents activists. Nike is recharacterized as out to police its own contractors, using FLA to arrest any violators; activists use Internet technology purchased from Acme. Meanwhile Nike war room staffers run to all the big academic conferences and intercept any campus organizing efforts on the big campuses. Nike successfully restored itself as protector of the impoverished Third World female worker.

There is not much activist deconstruction of Nike stories anymore. Nike is quick as Roadrunner, moving from location to location (canceling contracts where problems become known). Nike's storytelling organization constructs a reality in which Wile activists live and have not adapted.

Two activist organizations have a new strategy; Blackspot Sneaker (affiliate of Adbusters publisher-activist) and 'No Sweat' (inspired by activist Jeff Ballinger). They sell sneakers with higher-wage labor, union organizing, and better conditions than in Nike factories. The new activist-sneaker companies are calling the bluff and making the bet: we can sell shoes without sweatshop conditions and be profitable.

We can summarize these dynamics using Maruyama's (2003) 'second cybernetics theory.' A systemicity at level of polyphonic dynamism is the opposition of "deviation-amplifying and counteracting loops." First-order cybernetic revolution to system thinking was deviation-counteraction mechanistic-control; Second-order cybernetic revolution of open system thinking was deviation-amplification, through acts of organizing of greater requisite-variety than narrative-complexity sorted from the environment. What I will call "*third-order cybernetic revolution*" is beyond (level 4) open system, at levels of dialogic complexity (polyphonic, image-stylistic, symbol-chronotopicity, societal-architectonic discourse, & transcendence, I will introduce below as polypi).

As with Road Runner, there are deviation-amplifying cycles in which the activist by chance and accident may be sprung loose from whatever new trap being set. Activist sneaker companies also invoke deviation-counteracting loops to expose inconsistency after inconsistency between Nike's talk and walk; but by the time they do Wile has moved on. For example, in 2005 Nike was ranked 33rd, of 100 *ethical* corporate citizens, on the Russell 1000 index of publicly traded companies.ⁱⁱ

Enron Storytelling Organization A series of Enron studies explored how some “stories are ‘antenarrative’ when told without the proper plot sequence and mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory” (Boje, 2001: 3). Our Enron studies developed “antenarrative” theory by content-analyzing 9,864 news stories published between Dec 2001 and Mar 2002 (Boje, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005d; Boje & Rosile, 2002, 2003; Boje, Rosile, Durant & Luhman, 2004). Antenarrative is defined as “the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet, a proper narrative can be constituted” (Boje, 2001: 1). Antenarratives are ‘in the middle’ and ‘in-between’ (Boje 2001: 293), refusing to attach beginnings and endings needed to achieve narrative closure as required by Gabriel (2000), not petrified-narrative, in Czarniawska (2004).

Enron is dramaturgy gone amuck. For example, each year (between 1998 and 2001), an elaborate theatre stage was constructed on Enron’s 6th floor to simulate a *real* trading floor; it’s expensive theatre, \$500 to set up each desk, and more for phones in this stage-crafted spectacle, and more for the 36-inch flat panel screens, and teleconference conference rooms; the entire set was wired by computer technicians who feed fake statistics to the screens (Boje, 2002).

“Antenarratives of one cluster migrate and interpenetrate with those of other clusters” (Boje, Rosile, Durant & Luhman, 2004: 758). In 1985 Kenneth Lay, for example, concocted an antenarrative “bet” that the energy industry would be reordered through something Barry and Elmes (1997) call “strategic storytelling.” The antenarrative took hold, and by 1997 two Presidents had heralded Enron as the firm reengineering utility into energy industry for the new economy. What is interesting is how in 1985, another antenarrative was emerging; a scandal prophetic of future megaspectacle; an HNG/InterNorth subsidiary (not yet Enron), an oil corporation set up office in Valhalla, N.Y.; there were a dozen employees, half of whom were oil futures traders. Enron’s auditors discover in Jan 1987 that Enron Oil Corporation’s (Enron subsidiary) President, Louis J. Borget and treasurer, Thomas N. Mastroeni, were diverting \$142 million in company funds to Panamanian and other offshore accounts between 1985 and 1987 (Boje, 2002).

As this early antenarrative unfolds and refolds, Lay is tentative and cautious; he avoids confronting Borget and Mastroeni for committing fraud. Lay did not fire them until Apr 1987. When Lay did act, Enron was left holding the bag for about \$ 1 billion in trading liabilities. The Valhalla antenarrative is rehearsal for Lay's handling of the 2001 debacle (not firing Fastow, till late; denying knowledge of off-balance sheet accounting practices, etc.). Enron's plunge into bankruptcy became international scandal; and the storytelling organizations from Enron, Congress, Stock Exchange, business media outlets, to universities created antenarrative plots as to whodunit that became its own order of dialogic-complexity, to legitimate themselves in the collapse of the 7th largest corporation? (Boje & Rosile, 2002: 315).

I suppose such antenarratives could become what Czarniawska (2004) calls 'petrified'; yet antenarratives more often just unravel and fragment, merge with other tellings, or disappear when no longer part of anyone's tellings. The point is that the systemicity is *epically-dynamic* and includes deviation-amplifying, and not just static (deviation-counteracting) tellings.

Epic for Aristotle (350 BCE: 1459b) was less coherent storytelling than the poetics of tragedy because epic allows simultaneous telling across many stages. The epic theory is that antenarratives form clusters and that these clusters are intertextual across places and times; they do not follow the tragic-construction of rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement. Our studies suggest that epic and more tragic forms of story are dialectic (antenarrative vs. narrative). And that the epic, more than singular-plot-narrative takes in more simultaneous plotting attempts, more diverse pre-story tellings across the social and historical landscape, and allows us to inquire more clearly into emergence and complexity.

Antenarratives are highly dynamic, evolving into shifting patterns of pre-story connections that reterritorialize an epic-labyrinth of other antenarratives as well as petrified narratives. We found that restricting story to linear-narrative plot, masks the "epic-story" morphing of antenarrative story trajectories that are cyclical or non-linear, and the *Tamaraesque* networking of fragmented audiences to tellers telling simultaneously on stages widely distributed in a social landscape (Boje & Rosile, 2003).

Saying that various storytelling organizations constitute an epic context, suggests some wildly different systemicity dynamics than is foreseen in folkloric or narrative studies. It is the antenarratives that epic includes with abundance, while poetic (tragic, comedic, satiric, romantic) narrative marginalizes. There has been increasing interest in critical antenarrative theory and research (Barge 2002; Collins & Rainwater, 2005; Vickers, 2002).

McDonald's Storytelling Organization Most recently, we have been studying storying of McDonald's Corporation (Boje & Cai, 2004, 2005; Boje, Cai & Thomas, 2005; Boje & Rhodes, 2005 a, b; Boje, Enríquez, González & Macías. 2005). Our studies explore how four types of dialogism that Bakhtin (1968, 1973, 1981, & 1990) theorized:

First, polyphonic dialogism can be defined as fully-embodied discourse, where author and characters engage one another from their respective logics and ideological perspectives (Bakhtin, 1973, 1981). Key is the concept of double narration; a corporate author, for example, narrating through purchased voices of celebrities, experts, or even Ronald McDonald.

Second is stylistic-dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981), based upon an essay about the interrelationship of different kinds of stylistic speech acts: *skaz* (the use of informal speech such as McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" to narrate corporate image, & "Mc" accented words, like "McFamily"), direct speech (such as an executive letter to shareholders), scientific speech (such as McDonald's charts of cholesterol, fat, fiber, etc.), and various modes of artistic speech (such as stylistic-décor, architecture, etc. that are pluralistic modes of story expression); in all Bakhtin posits five types of stylistics that are in dialogic interrelationship. McDonald's France has a McStyle website illustrating ten restaurant-styles to choose from.⁴

Third, is chronotopicity (Bakhtin, 1981), an essay on nine conceptualization of the relativity of time and space, plus a tenth (Bakhtin, 1973); four are about adventure (romantic, chivalric, everyday, & biographical); five are various aspects of folkloristics ranging from Rabelaisian, the masks of clown-fool-rogue, grotesque realism, all the way to idyllic preferences for here-and-now time in one's hometown; and a tenth called the

⁴ McDonald's France – click « tout sour McDo » to get to McStyle <http://www.mcdonalds.fr/>

“castle ” for sorting out divergent ideologies that meet, including the historicized ambiance of the meeting place; these ten are viewed as in dialogic interrelationship.

Fourth, is architectonic-dialogism (Bakhtin, 1990), the interanimation of three disparate discourses (ethics, aesthetics, & cognitive). Architectonics was first used by Immanuel Kant (1781/1900: 466) says, “by the term *Architectonic* I mean the art of constructing a system” (italics in original).

Finally, there is the interrelationship between the four sorts of dialogism, which is the *dialogism of the dialogisms*, which I call “*Polypi*” (Boje, 2005e, f). Polypi’s literal meaning is a colony of hydra, and was used by Hans Christian Andersen, over a century ago, in “*The Little Mermaid*” first published in 1837. For Andersen (1974: 67-68) polypi was thought to be on the borderline between vegetable and animal. Polypi is asexual; it can bud and reproduce without sexual intercourse. Cut one up into fragments, and each part will grow into a full polypus organism. A polypi grows, hunts, and hides from danger in all directions. Polypi is the highest order of systematicity-complexity.

Here I mean “polypi” to imply capitalism. I am not saying Andersen had the same meaning; that cannot be determined from his writing. In capitalism, organizations story in several orders of dialogic-systemicity-complexity. I define polypi-systematicity, as the dialogism of the dialogisms of lower order complexity from polyphony, stylistics, and chronotopes to architectonics (Boje, 2005f).

Our main finding is that McDonald’s tells stories dialogically and strategically, using a wide variety of mediums, not just oral, or written, but story told via the décor and architecture; story is embedded in wall murals, and emblazoned in the collage of images and science reference in a simple trayliner.

In terms of polyphonic story-strategy (Barry & Elmes, 1997), McDonald’s global story-strategy was respun: *Go Active!* “To be the leading restaurant promoting healthy, happy, active lifestyles everywhere we do business” (Kapica, 2004: slide 17). The strategic story has its central plot: eating fast food is compatible with active, fitness, and balanced nutrition lifestyle is healthy if you follow precautions.

To promote this strategic storyline, Ronald McDonald gets a new show, doing fitness work out exercises for children, their parents, and employees; fitness coaches, such as Bob Greene (Oprah Winfrey’s trainer) are recruited to sell the new storyline, and

trayliners are printed up with references to Greene and Oprah, and include nutrition charts about fat content; Adult Happy Meals included step-o-meters; and stores gave out brochures instructing parents how many hours of exercise children required to keep them healthy on their fast food diet (Boje, Driver & Cai, 2005).

Part of the strategy is to story “virtual leaders” using what we call “virtual leader construct” (VLC), a non-human image of a leader who is purposefully created by an organization (Boje & Rhodes, 2005a, b). Our study of fast food industry found three types of VLC: VLC as an imitation of a former flesh-and-blood leader (e.g. Ray Kroc or Dave Thomas), VLC as a creative re-representation of a former leader (Col Sanders in cartoon version), and VLC as a fabricated leader with no direct relation to an actual person (Ronald McDonald).

Ronald approaches being a hyperreal leader in that he is generated by a model of a “real without origin” (Baudrillard, 1983: 2). Ronald McDonald is the clown icon of the McDonald’s Corporation, and holds two ‘official’ executive positions. Ronald, as he is incarnated by more than 250 actors who play him around the world in his new live show (*Get Moving with Ronald*), and animation-Ronald appearing in commercials and on tray liners, is doing what actual transformational leaders do: he is influencing people to ensure the organization achieves its strategic corporate objectives (Kapica, 2004).

On 23 August 2003 Ronald was appointed as McDonald’s *Chief Happiness Officer* and his name was listed next to the other corporate officers in the 2003 annual report. Less than a year later on 16 April 2004 he was given the additional responsibility of *Ambassador for an Active Lifestyle*.

Virtual leadership is accomplished via *double narration* (Bakhtin, 1973). Expectations derive from the idea that “between the rogue and the fool emerges a unique coupling of the two, the image of the clown” (Bakhtin, 1981: 404) who has a long standing reputation of being able to talk back to power (Bakhtin, 1968).

The heroic narration of leaders such as Kroc or Ronald in a “strong plot” of transformation can cater to cultural expectations (Czarniawska & Rhodes, 2006). An alternative view to plot-petrification is that leadership is a distributed systemically, not in an individual (Gronn, 2002). Virtualized leaders can be restylized and contemporalized. Ronald has appeared in many incarnations since his humble beginnings as an entertainer

at a Washington DC McDonald's franchise in the early 1960s. He has had five makeovers since then.

For example, in 1999-2002 Klasky-Csupo (producers of *The Simpsons*, *Rugrats* & *Wild Thornbirds*) give Ronald his 5th makeover. In 1999 there was a Camp Ronald strategy retreat, and it was decided to replace the Ronald in the 1st 3 Klasky-Csupo films with a much thinner model to star in the last three. The new Ronald is thinner, and more hyper, like a Jim Carey; old Ronald was plumper, more lethargic, and more easy-going, like a Mr. Rogers.

Ronald's leadership capacity is clearly demonstrated in the series of events following the death of CEO Jim Cantalupo on 19 April 2004. Ironically, Cantalupo (a cheeseburger and fries lover), died of heart failure just when he was to celebrate McDonald's most highly successful corporate reorientation: to become a nutritious and fitness-conscious chain (Boje & Rhodes, 2005a). Cantalupo strategically turned around McDonald's corporation, taking over as CEO after 14 consecutive months of same store sales decline, a stock price that was at the lowest point in nearly a decade, and a downgraded credit rating by Standard and Poor.

In less than 16 months as CEO, Cantalupo introduced salads and other nutritional food sources, slowed franchise proliferation, and refocused McDonald's strategy towards a 'back to basics' approach of customer service. The result was increased same store sales and reversal of the sagging stock price (stock rose 70.8% during Cantalupo's tenure as CEO, from \$16.08 in December 2002 to \$27.46 in April 2004). By 6 am on the same day as Cantalupo's death, the Board convened (in teleconference, but with several members attending in person) to implement its formal succession plan (Boje & Rhodes, 2005a; Boje & Cai, 2005). By 7 am Charlie Bell was the new CEO. Bell's story, as it was publicized by McDonald's, told of a rags-to-riches American dream (even though he was Australian) that saw him start his career as a 15 year old fry clerk who made the climb to CEO. This was a reversal of the *McJob* image of dead end, no skill work in fast food outlets.

Immediately following Bell's appointment, Ronald took on yet another leadership task. The Board commissioned full-page advertisements of Ronald commemorating Cantalupo. The advertisements presented a photo of Ronald in human clown form, with a

tear running down his right cheek. As the tear made his clown makeup run, there was a caption that read, “*We miss you Jim.*” The advertisement, distributed just two days after Cantalupo’s death, appeared in eight major news outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and USA Today. Translated versions were placed in major dailies around the world. What is most interesting about the tear advertisement is that it was Ronald, not Charlie Bell (the new CEO) or a Board member, who gave emotional expression to corporate grief. As we will explore, this is an indicative demonstration that Ronald has achieved the status of a third order VLC. In the “Ronald’s tear” example, Ronald had the charismatic influence to appeal to people around the world, and to meet the strategic goal of sustaining corporate image cohesion in a time of crisis. Ronald, more than the other VLCs in the fast food industry, plays a special role in corporate transformation. Ironically, Charlie Bell, who stepped down from McDonald’s CEO to battle cancer, died Jan 16 2005.

In terms of the challenges of changing consumer preferences and public opinion about fast food, McDonald’s has been particularly singled out. The extensive publicity surrounding the 2004 movie *Supersize Me* is a salient example of this. The movie is a documentary that follows director and star Morgan Spurlock as he ate nothing but McDonald’s food for 30 days. As a result he gained 28.5 pounds in weight, became impotent and was warned by doctors that his endeavor was a serious health risk. McDonald’s has also faced a variety of lawsuits about its alleged contribution to obesity.

In sum, your everyday McDonald’s restaurant chain, uses a variety of storytelling behaviors, story-strategies, and virtual leadership constructs that we have only begun to study. In particular there is a polyphony of polyphonic, stylistic, chronotopic, and architectonic dialogisms that McDonald’s orchestrates, yet its systemicity is unfinalized, unmerged, and unfinished.

Conclusions

Traditional folklore and narratology imprisons story in “proper” plot-type and ignores the “improper” story-types that are critical to understand emergence and complexity processes of story production, distribution and consumption in organizations and society

Each genus of storytelling organization reviewed from Goldco to McDonald's, has its unique signature. Each constructs stories with a Polypi of dialogisms that are interactive: polyphonic voicing, multi-stylistic modes of expression, particular chronotopes, and architectonic-confluences of societal discourses.

Story cannot be imprisoned by traditional narrative and folklore approaches. It is time to release story from narrative prison. It is time to take a look at the ways in which storytelling organizations are dynamic, with undefined, unenslaved, unorganized, and unfinished storying going on in dialogized interpenetration with linear narrative.

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