



## Organizational memory: Narrative control and resistance\*

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**review of:**

David M. Boje (2008) *Storytelling organizations*. London: SAGE. (PB: pp. 282, £26.99, ISBN: 9781412929776).

This book is all about the stories we tell ourselves (p. 6), and David Boje is one of the best storytellers around in management and organization theory. But he is difficult to pin down, and he knows it. He roams around through vast fields of literature, including history, literary theory, and sociology. He says his book is an exploration of ‘complexity, collective memory, strategy, and organization change’ (p. 2). It could easily find its way to becoming a recommended text for a course in any of those subjects, and I hope it does. His analysis of the controversies between different schools of thought in strategy should be required reading on any strategy course, and if the set text is Mintzberg et al.’s *Strategy Process* (2003) then Boje’s list of their misreadings should be obligatory. Boje’s output is prolific, and his contributions to management and organization theory are wide ranging. An indication of this is that he cites nearly fifty of his own references in this book, which represents a kind of synthesis of his previous research.

My own interest in Boje’s work centers on history and memory (see Rowlinson et al., 2010), and Boje’s potential contribution to a critical perspective on organizational memory studies. So I will focus on a series of related themes in *Storytelling Organizations*. For a start I outline Boje’s critique of the instrumentalist treatment of memory in the knowledge management fad, on the basis of which he develops his own typology of collective memory, drawing on the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Along the way he deals with the role of founders in organizational storytelling, the role of memory in sensemaking, and the relation between orality and textuality in organizational history. While Boje finds misreadings in the work of Mintzberg and others, it is not difficult to find some serious misreadings by Boje, and at times his excessive formalization of concepts degenerates into a kind of pseudo technician

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mumbo-jumbo. This is at odds with his engaging conversational style of writing in other parts of the book, and his brave decision to share details from his personal background in a revealing ‘autoethnography’. Methodologically it is worth noting Boje’s imaginative use of publicly available documentary sources. Finally, there is the question of whether Boje is writing as an advocate of resistance or as a would-be consultant, or whether he thinks the two roles are compatible. Prompted by Boje’s own sense of fun, I conclude with a proposal for a roundtable discussion on organizational memory with Boje as the guest speaker.

## Knowledge management

In an extensive glossary Boje defines story, or ‘storying’ as he prefers to call it, as ‘an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience’ (p. 262). As far as Boje is concerned, every organization is a Storytelling Organization, not just the glamorous or notorious organizations we are all familiar with (p. 4). Boje’s emphasis on ‘storying’ as an interpretive activity is very much at odds with the knowledge management fad, which treats stories and memory instrumentally as ‘knowledge assets’. As Boje argues:

This translates to getting tacit knowledge from narratives and emergent stories. Fortunately or unfortunately, things are not so simple. Transferring tacit knowledge (i.e. stories) is problematic for all the obvious reasons cited in this book. (p. 214)

Boje makes the point that collective memory is *not* ‘like a book, where the pages are stories and one only has to recall the story, as one would recall a page from a book... The problem with the book or computer metaphor, is collective memory is not an imprinting that is invariant, or hidden for all times in one’s subconscious library of permanent texts or computer chips, all stored away neatly in the brain’ (p. 83).

Boje dismisses ‘the knowledge management, knowledge reengineering and learning organization fads of story consulting’, and he is highly suspicious of the ‘managerialist ideology’ that sees any story as belonging to the corporation (p. 95). He sees the dark side of story consulting, whereby,

in the new global knowledge economy, a tacit knowledge practice communicated in stories of skilled labor of one country is being abstracted, codified, and diffused to less skilled, lower paid labor in Third World factories. That’s deskilling... (p. 215)

It is not clear whether Boje sees this kind of knowledge capture as impossible or simply as objectionable. On the one hand he rejects the idea that ‘emergent stories’ are ‘tacit-knowledge’, but on the other hand he states that ‘story rights are being violated’ by corporations (p. 95).

For Boje, the concept of an *emergent story* is particularly important. He defines it as ‘absolute novelty, spontaneity, and improvisation, without past or future’ (p.3). According to Boje, ‘emergent stories’ need one or more of the following five qualities in order to become enduring: *authenticity*, *contagion*, *institutional support*, *entertainment value*, and *cultural force*:

Most emergent stories lack the quality of authenticity, where they are believable beyond those present. Most also lack the quality of contagion, where gossip jumps to outsiders to become rumour... Most emergent stories lack the quality of institutional support to where they become legend. A few have entertainment value. (p. 38)

Once an emergent story has become a legend then presumably it can be captured by the knowledge management story consultant and violated by a corporation. But emergent stories can never be fully captured or suppressed. The corporate control narrative is constantly orchestrated by an 'entire army of narrativists' and yet it is continually threatened by 'emergent counter-stories' from 'gossip, rumour, rebellion', and when '[g]affes in stylistic competency or by whistle blowing disclose strategic secrets' (p. 129).

## Organizational memory

Boje does not use the term organizational memory. Instead he refers to 'collective memory', which he has explored as part of a long term project (p. 3). He claims that '[c]ollective memory has not been adequately theorized, much less researched in story and narrative studies' (p. 75). Strangely, this suggests that Boje locates his analysis of collective memory in 'story and narrative studies' rather than management and organization theory. He does not even cite the mainstream literature on organizational memory (e.g. Walsh & Ungson, 1991), let alone the critics (e.g. Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Nissley & Casey, 2002). Although he does not explicitly say so, one reason for referring to collective memory in organizations rather than organizational memory is that organizational memory could easily be confused with official managerial memory, as it is in the knowledge management fad, and Boje continually emphasises that management does not have control over all aspects of collective memory. This is a missed opportunity, because several of us have been trying to develop a critical perspective on organizational memory. Andrea Casey in particular has a longstanding interest in collective memory in organizations (Casey, 1997) and an ongoing concern with sociological models in the related field of organizational learning (Casey, 2005). Nissley and Casey's (2002) criticisms of the storage bin model that treats organizational memory as a repository of facts reflects the wider critique of mechanical models in which memories are seen as merely computer files (Rose, 2008). Boje's rejection of the book or computer metaphor for memory in knowledge management needs to be located as part of this broader critique.

In fact there has been an 'explosion of interest in... collective memory, cultural memory, and commemoration' (Bernstein, 2004: 165), or social remembering (Misztal, 2003), under the general rubric of 'social memory studies' (Olick & Robbins, 1998: 24-25). Social memory studies remains 'a nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise' (Olick, 2008: 24-25), but even so it is hard to excuse Boje's neglect of this burgeoning literature. Part of the problem is that Boje simply tries to cover too much ground in *Storytelling Organizations*, and the book is burdened with an excess of references. Another problem is that when he discusses concepts such as collective memory he does so as if he is coming to seminal texts de novo, offering his own insights without reference to the numerous commentaries and interpretations.

The French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), is usually credited with introducing the concept of collective memory into contemporary usage (Misztal, 2003; Olick, 2008; Olick & Robbins, 1998: 106; Zerubavel, 2003). Aside from a few notable exceptions such as Andrea Casey, Halbwachs is ritually cited but rarely read in organizational memory studies. This means that Boje's detailed reading of Halbwachs's *Collective Memory* (1980 [1950]) is valuable. He emphasizes Halbwachs's point that 'when we have a remembrance we do so, 99 per cent of the time, with the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of various groups, of which we are a part' (p. 81). However, Boje characterizes Halbwachs's theory of collective memory as 'a bridge between Bergson's sensemaking of individuals and Durkheim's social solidarity of social construction by groups. It therefore falls in between the scope of phenomenologist and social psychologist' (p. 82). By contrast, the sociologists Olick and Robbins (1998) maintain that 'Halbwachs developed his concept of collective memory not only beyond philosophy but against psychology'. Ricoeur places Halbwachs firmly in the Durkheimian school which opposed its own 'a methodological holism' against methodological individualism, and made individual memory problematic, even threatening to dismiss the then emerging phenomenology 'under the more or less infamous label of psychologism' (Ricoeur, 2004: 95). Social memory studies derived from Halbwachs is therefore partly defined by a rejection of 'an individual-psychological approach to memory' (Olick & Robbins, 1998: 109). This has serious implications for the prevailing methodological individualism in organizational memory studies, which Boje does not consider.

Boje is clearly enamoured with the work of Paul Ricoeur, but unfortunately he does not discuss Ricoeur's major work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), which provides one of the best critical guides to Halbwachs. This is probably because *Storytelling Organizations* pulls together Boje's research over the last twenty years, most of it written before *Memory, History, Forgetting* was published.

Boje criticizes Halbwachs for not elucidating a typology of collective memory (p.86). This is slightly misleading because Halbwachs (1980 [1950]) in fact distinguished between several types of memory, including autobiographical memory, historical memory, and history, as well as collective memory (Olick & Robbins, 1998: 111). From the various surveys of memory studies it is clear that there are more than enough typologies to choose from for studying collective memory in organizations (Mai, 2009). Boje's own typology is overly technical and I doubt that it will be taken up. But many of his observations on collective memory are highly pertinent for organizational memory studies. As he continually reminds us, '[p]eople are more than just limited information processors. People are symbolic, reinterpret history, bring multiple discourses (ethical, cognitive, aesthetic) to bear in the moment of performing stories, especially collectively told ones' (p. 51). Collective memory 'is also collective forgetting, collective rehistoricizing, and collective striving for coherence' (p. 54). Although the importance of Foucault is widely recognized in social memory studies (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998), his work has been neglected in organizational memory studies. Boje reminds us of the relevance of Foucault's concept of 'counter-memory' – the 'marginalized counterstories' (p. 89) – and the ever present possibility that managerial collective memory will be parodied or ironically taken at face value.

## Founders

Boje has conducted a long line of ‘founding narrative research’ (p. 9) on Wal-Mart, Disney, and McDonalds, and bringing these studies together in *Storytelling Organizations* shows just how impressive they are. Boje traces how founding narratives develop over time, often from very sparse beginnings, as at Wal-Mart, where the ‘petrified’ founder narrative is trotted out whenever there is a scandal to demonstrate that whatever is being done conforms to the ‘founder’s vision’. Managerialist collective memory is founder-centered and ‘always embraces the chimeras of origin and ending’ (p. 87). Boje defines a ‘Founding Narrative (often called founding story)... as a sentence or paragraph (or longer) that answers the question, where did we come from?’ (p. 101). He raises the question, ‘do originary founding narratives exist, or are they retrospective concoctions, retrofitted after the fact, after many years?’ (p. 10) – wisely he doesn’t give a definitive answer. Of course, he is sceptical about the advice from corporate culture gurus such as Schein ‘that founders or subsequent ‘managers can create cultures’ [e.g. founding stories]’ (p. 212). Although he doesn’t cite them, Boje lines up with previous sceptics towards founding narratives (e.g. Martin, 1985; Martin et al., 1985), who also note that in anthropology cultures are seen as being ‘highly resistant to change’ (p. 212).

Boje’s main sources are company websites and annual reports, and from these he highlights the ‘changeable aspects of founding narratives’ for companies such as Wal-Mart (p. 11). Perceptively, Boje sees that although founding narratives are changeable, organizations are also constrained by the stories they tell themselves when they contrast the present to the past, e.g. at Disney storytellers ask “‘What would Walt do?’” Or at Wal-Mart where people always ask, “‘What would Sam do?’”... Or at McDonalds, “‘What would Kroc do?’” (p. 193). Culturally-oriented business historians such as Per Hansen (2007) have been coming to a similar view of the significance of historical narratives as both resources and constraints for organizations.

## Sensemaking

According to the blurb on the back of the book Karl E. Weick doesn’t know what he thinks until he sees what David Boje says. Given such a compliment it is hardly surprising that *Storytelling Organizations* is littered with sensemaking. It must be one of the most over-used words in management and organization theory. At times it is tempting to ask whether Boje would make any less sense if he simply deleted the word, as it often seems superfluous. Of course its inclusion functions as a sign that Boje sees himself as an exponent of style-as-theory (Van Maanen, 2000). There is a suggestion early on that Boje might develop a critique of Weick, as when he claims to ‘go beyond retrospective sensemaking’ (p. 13) – but predictably it turns out that it was *readers* of Weick, not Weick himself, who mistakenly ‘took sensemaking to be about emergence of variety rather than control’ (p. 199). Nevertheless Boje does hint at the authoritarian connotations of sensemaking (c.f. Rowlinson, 2004: 618) when he writes of the opposition to orchestrated ‘sensemaking narratives of control’ (p. 128).

Most of the managerialist founding narratives that Boje critiques are produced from an objectivist perspective. By examining the process by which they are retrospectively constructed and changed according to the needs of the moment Boje reveals the relativism that belies that objectivism. But then the social construction of these narratives of control can be seen as an instance of sensemaking, which is about retrospective decisiveness, whereby people ‘start with the outcome and reconstruct a history’ that led up to it in a single convincing narrative (Weick, 1995: 184). The appeal of sensemaking for Boje is that it seems to allow for alternative interpretations of the past from multiple cultural perspectives, with actors constantly reshaping representations of the past as they enact their own present. But this relativism is double edged, because it also licenses the orchestration of control narratives or even dubious historical revisionism (Booth et al., 2007). Unlike Weick, Boje confronts the dark side of corporate power, and this necessitates a more ambivalent view of concepts such as sensemaking than Boje is prepared to take. Sensemaking is thus a constraint on Boje’s analysis of storytelling organizations.

## Orality and textuality

Boje prefers stories to narratives. According to Boje, a narrative is a ‘linear sequence’ with a discrete beginning, middle, and end. It is about centering or control, and is ‘usually a backward-looking (retrospective) gaze from present, back through the past, sorting characters, dialog, themes, etc., into one plot, and changes little over time’ (p. 7). By contrast, a story ‘is more apt to be dispersive (unravelling coherence, asserting differences)’ (p. 7). In general, Boje associates narrative with text and control in organizations, whereas stories, and especially emergent stories, are transmitted orally and less susceptible to control. Boje is suspicious of the subordination of orality to textuality in formal organizations, where everything is written up in files, knowledge is collected, and all actions have to be signed-off (p. 86).

For all of his immersion in literary theory, Boje fails to spell out exactly how or why his distinction between story and narrative is at odds with the generally accepted distinctions between story, plot, and narrative. A narrative is generally regarded as a form of telling a story, a series of events, that are linked by a chain of causation, the plot (Cobley, 2001). A narrative generally has a story and a plot, whether it is linear or not, and they are not usually regarded as mutually exclusive, with narrative being ‘bad’ and story being ‘good’. Boje’s normative connotations detract from the usefulness of these analytical tools, which is not to say that one cannot distinguish between good and bad narratives.

Boje romanticizes the orality of living stories in collective memory (p. 240). Whether he likes it or not, management and organization theory are by definition almost entirely textual, as is clear from Boje’s own prodigious textual output. From reading his book, my guess is that Boje is a good oral story teller, but he conveys that textually. Nevertheless, he seems to be on to something when he notes that annual reports increasingly ‘attempt to mimic orality (interviews or letters by the CEO), and some visual artistry. Reports are looking more like magazines. It is a level of collective writing by artists, accountants, executives, consultants, and division heads that has yet

to be studied' (p. 23). In other words, annual reports appear to be undergoing an interesting change as a form of narrative and the stories they present. Even so, Boje over-romanticizes oral storytelling.

## Misreadings

Boje accuses Mintzberg et al. (2003) of misreading, abominably, the work of Selznick, Chandler, and Schumpeter (p. 109). But some of his own readings are questionable. When discussing dialectics, for example, Boje declares that Marx rejected Hegel's 'teleology of spirit':

Marx... thought a non-spiritual teleology, a determining political economy (instead of Spirit) would bring the working class (antithesis) to oppose the pesky capitalist (thesis), and yield a new thesis: a democratic form of organizing, *with workers and capitalists deciding together how to invest and organize the enterprise*. But the dialectic ran a more Soviet course, and the revolution of the workers' liberation from oppression, did not occur. (p. 21; my emphasis)

Clearly Boje cannot conceive of a non-hierarchical mode of production in which egalitarian institutions decide on the level of investment without capitalists (c.f. Marglin, 1976 [1974]). Fair enough, but if Marx thought the same then he was not a 'Marxist' (c.f. Engels, 1970 [1890]; Marens, 2009: 93). What this misreading suggests is that Boje is critical of the capitalist corporation on its own terms, as if it could fulfil his call for a more honest and transparent form of storytelling organization. But still, as Boje might argue, it would be rash for Marxists to rush into revolution without recognizing that the stories we tell ourselves will affect the way we go about it.

Boje refers to himself as one of 'those who did not buy into the two-by-two cage narrative of Burrell and Morgan' (p. 56). Again, fair enough, but it is an exaggeration to say that 'social phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, discourse, and intertextual analysis of poststructuralism' cannot be contained in 'the Burrell and Morgan cells'. Boje presents himself as the outsider, playing 'Off-Broadway', while Burrell and Morgan's 'four cell prison became widely popular on Broadway' (p. 56). What is so frustrating about the advocates of style-as-theory, such as Weick and Van Maanen (2000) is the way they present themselves as outsiders. But all too often the alleged insiders they inveigh against are critics, such as Burrell and Morgan (see Weick, 1995: 35), whose stance might be something more than mere style. Whatever their inadequacies, Burrell and Morgan's (1979) paradigms provided space for radical humanist or radical structuralist critiques, especially in UK business schools. Style-as-theory is just the kind of aesthetic radicalism that the new spirit of capitalism can easily accommodate (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007).

Boje claims that, 'Like Ivan Illich (1993) and Walter Ong (1982), Walter Benjamin thought that orality storytelling was being corrupted by ways of textuality, ways that written narrative imposes a BME [beginning-middle-end] prison onto oral telling' (p. 58). Leaving aside Illich and Benjamin, I was intrigued by this reference to Ong (2002 [1982]). As far as I can make out this is the only time that Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is cited by Boje, and he obviously thought he could use it to support the contention that textuality is corrupting orality. But Ong could actually be used to make the opposite

case, that management and organizations are too often presented as if they are oral cultures, whereas the oral cultures Ong deals with are non-literate or preliterate, and the orality of management is a kind of “secondary orality”... which depends on writing and print for its existence’ (Ong, 2002 [1982]: 3). Of course memory predates writing, but Ong argues that ‘[w]riting created history’, and print transformed history, not merely in quantitative terms by increasing the number of written ‘facts’, but also by fostering a feeling for closure that affects the plotting of historical writing, ‘the selection of the kinds of theme that historians use to break into the seamless web of events around them so that a story can be told’ (Ong, 2002 [1982]: 168). In other words, narratives with a beginning, middle, and end are a concomitant of text. Another concomitant is the kind of close reading of texts that Boje himself conducts to detect misreadings.

As Basbøll (forthcoming; Basbøll & Graham, 2006) has demonstrated, sensemaking collapses under the scrutiny of close reading. As a genre, style-as-theory tries to evade close textual analysis by its own attempts to mimic orality, almost as if it is a written record of a conversation, recounting a series of encounters with academics who break with convention (e.g. p. 57), rather than a carefully constructed text. Style-as-theory also presents itself as iconoclastic, unconstrained by the conventional boxes and cells such as paradigms or schools of strategy. But categorization is unavoidable in the textual realm of academia, and Boje’s textuality is nowhere more evident than in his own proliferation of technicist typologies.

There is always a danger of degenerating into mumbo-jumbo when technical jargon is used to make literary theory sound scientific (Wheen, 2004). Boje bombards us with scientific neologisms such as ‘systemicity’, his ‘replacement word for the outdated static linear-hierarchic conceptions of whole “*system*”’ (p. 29). Here are some of the worst examples of Boje’s pseudo-scientific technicism:

Holographic strategy is multi-voiced, multi-linguaged, and polyphonically and now multi-stylistically dialogic. (p. 66)

[P]olypi strategy storying is the multi-dialogized complexity whereupon polyphonic, stylistic, chronotopic, and architectonic dialogism collide with monologic narrative order. (p. 98)

The third Cybernetic Revolution is underway, making whole system monologic singularity a dialogical whirlwind. (p. 62)

Contemporary strategy is not just multi-chronotopic. Strategy can be chronotopically dialogic. (p. 138)

The point here is that Boje’s exposure of misreadings in the various schools of strategy, as well as the mimicking of orality in annual reports, are manifestations of textuality through close readings of written texts. Unfortunately there are aspects of Boje’s own text that do not hold up well under a close reading, in particular his contradictory adherence to the imitation orality of sensemaking on one hand, and on the other hand his tendency to construct technicist typologies. To be blunt, just because something sounds good in a seminar, doesn’t mean it will read well in a book.



## Autoethnography

Along the way we learn a lot about David Boje in *Storytelling Organizations*. As he reminds us, ‘we retrospectively recall past events in a way that supports our concept of who we are’ (p. 5). Boje repeatedly recalls the past in a way that supports his concept of who he is. We learn of how he proposed to his wife at the 1995 Eastern Academy of Management (p. 75). He tells us that he is ‘a Harley (after market) builder and rider’ (p. 33). Then there is the name-dropping: ‘I met Alfred Chandler Jr. when he came to present to the strategy faculty at UCLA in the 1980s’ (p. 141). And he doesn’t just meet these people; he is with them at some of their most poignant moments:

I was in Lou Pondy’s office the day he opened his rejection letter from the editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ). It was 1976. He read parts aloud. I tried not to listen but had to listen. He gave me the letter to read the rest. I tried not to read but had to read. (p. 31)

And they are on hand to reassure him that he is still an outsider:

Bill Wolfe, when visiting my office at UCLA, said he could tell I did not fit in, I was not part of the institution. He was right of course, but I could not, at the time, discern how he figured it out. (p. 84)

Fortunately there is a hint of self-awareness when Boje admits that ‘[t]he writing game is to make academic heroes, while leaving the working staff voiceless. And now I am caught playing the game’ (p. 162). But this mimicking of orality transgresses the norms of scholarly discussion and peer review. By inserting himself into the text he is claiming prerogatives for his position as that of a wealthy American who has worked at elite institutions and is on intimate terms with the great and the good. Again, it jars with his obvious commitments and, more importantly, slightly undermines the serious attempt he makes to write an autoethnography.

In the autoethnography, Boje tells the story of a family tragedy: the death of his Aunt Dorothy (p. 25). Here Boje delivers something personal but interesting, well researched and genuinely moving, and I’d encourage it to anyone to read for themselves. Very few authors would attempt something like this, and even fewer could pull it off. Boje says his ‘autoethnography is not a story. It is in-between biography and impressions’ (p. 239). It is a family memoir-cum-confession, which reveals his family background and upbringing in a way that gives the reader a real insight into where Boje is coming from. I won’t try to tell the story, but from it we learn that Boje grew up in Washington State, he was a rebel as a teenager and spent his nineteenth birthday in a City Jail. In order to go free he had to leave the state, never to return. He did a tour of Vietnam, went to college – the first in his family – and then got a PhD. He finally got permission to go back to Washington state, but only because the authorities hadn’t computerized his original records, not because he was deemed respectable enough to return (p. 231). On balance, Boje comes across a better person for telling us that he hasn’t forgotten who he is and where he comes from. But it is a difficult balance.

## Methods and sources

The sheer volume of Boje's research is impressive, and he uses a whole battery of qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, and 'document analysis' (e.g. p. 42). I am most interested in his documentary analysis. For the most part, Boje uses publicly available texts. He makes impressive use of internet research and on-line sources and clearly has a knack for doing this kind of analysis, although there is certainly scope for further articulation of his methodology. He demonstrates how much analysis can be done simply because corporations want to control narratives:

Narrative inquiry into [the] *stylistic maelstrom* generated by even one global firm is daunting. A global corporation puts out hundreds of pages of annual reports. It proliferates hundreds of pages of press releases, brochures, and advertisements. Add to this the countless speeches by executives at annual meetings, training sessions, and press conferences, plus everyday expressive conversation and gesture. (p. 125; emphasis in original)

In addition to textual sources Boje sensitizes us to the stories to be found in the juxtapositions of décor and architecture 'all around us' that often go unnoticed (pp. 23, 85). For example, like many of us Boje works in an institution where on one wall there are portraits of all the white male heads before the current one, and on another wall there are the smiling faces celebrating diversity (c.f. Swan, 2010).

Boje implicitly criticizes a crude materialist view that organizational communication is merely a representation of underlying interests or reality. 'Organizations enter, and evolve in, an already aestheticized, cognized, and ethically diverse environment,' he says (p. 156). And he avoids reification of the corporation when he notes that '[o]rganizations have multiple authors, beholders, characters, and directors, as do their environments' (p. 158). What is more, following Weber, Boje maintains that capitalism has always been rooted in aesthetics (p. 178).

Boje's methods are showcased in a series of vignettes and in-depth case studies. I particularly liked the vignette of Norwest Bank and its acquisition of Wells Fargo, with its '150 year history, and its stage coach logo' (p. 90). His in-depth case study of McDonald's (pp. 66-73) traces how its narratives have developed over time, including 'the McDonaldization of language' (p. 67). Interestingly he points out that the 'McJob' is a term which has escaped the company's control. Originally, for McDonald's, it meant a job for 'the physically or mentally challenged, who would work for less' (p. 67). Boje refers to the McDeaths of two McDonald's CEOs who 'had health issues that are allegedly related to fast food diet' (p. 70), even though in McDonald's Annual Reports from 2004 and 2007, Ronald McDonald got slimmer and younger over time (p. 133)!

Boje demonstrates how annual reports can be read by raising awareness of how '[e]ach line of a narrative or story is an answer to something (either from an old battle, or some new one brewing)' (p. 24). He focuses on 'how annual reports can be studied critically by deciphering stylistic elements that manipulate the definition of the situation' (p. 130) through a complex juxtaposition of 'laundry lists of income and expenses with the image-management narrative' (p. 132). He notes how annual reports have got 'longer, thicker, more multi-stylistic, and full of fragments' (p. 132), with 'photos of diversity',

for example, to persuade the ‘docile reader that the firm really does celebrate and value diversity’. According to McDonald’s Annual Reports, it is customers who ‘tell us we are inclusive’, as if the company is simply reporting what it has been told. A manifestation of the intertextuality of McDonald’s annual reports is that critics are alluded to but not named (p. 137).

Drawing on Bakhtin, Boje argues that in annual reports, ‘[t]he image narrative can be authentic style or part of deception, an illusion, or an imposter, as in Enron’ (p. 125). This highlights a methodological ambiguity in relation to representations of the past, as when Boje argues that

annual reporting to investors, can be quite imaginative re-presentations of history, a fictitious image, for example of environment commitment record that is plain greenwashing... Under the guise of image management, a past is created that never was. (p. 88)

It is never quite clear whether Boje sees himself as exposing, in an objective realist mode, the ‘false claims and distortions in image stylistic management’ (p. 126), or whether he is analysing corporate communication as a particular form of narrative control. From an objectivist standpoint, it could be suggested that there is a true and undistorted narrative waiting to be told, and not merely a variety of competing narratives. Hence he is a critic-cum-consultant, on hand to help corporations write an honest and genuinely polyphonic stakeholder narrative. When Boje states that ‘[o]ften the past is reimagined from the vantage point of the present’, the question must be asked, could it be otherwise? Is the corporate construction merely one of many competing narratives, or is it a distortion of the truth? Boje is never quite clear on this point, and he continually uses a kind of realist terminology of misrepresentation, false claims, distortions, manipulation, as if this can be unmasked to show the reality.

Boje has a sophisticated understanding of history. This comes through in his characterization of Chandler’s ‘comparative business history’ (p. 113) as a narrative of progress that rests ‘on the metaphysical illusion that the world is getting better and better’ (p.146). In Foucauldian, or Nietzschean terms, Chandler represents ‘monumental history’ (p.146). But Boje doesn’t locate his own research in relation to the ‘epistemological fragility’ of history (Jenkins, 1991: 11). Perhaps this is because Boje doesn’t really see his own research as history, being more concerned with representations of the past in collective memory. But if the study of collective memory is less about ‘what actually happened in history’ and more about ‘how we *remember* it’ (Zerubavel, 2003: 2), then Boje could be more restrained in his suggestion that corporate control narratives are false.

## Resistance and collusion

Boje clearly identifies himself with the ‘critters’ who attend conferences such as Critical Management Studies (p. 241). As a critter, he states that

some of us resist retrospective-managerial-control narratives, we know that what is going on is a whole lot more fragmented, scattered, partial, and dialectic, indeterminate, and unknowable. (p. 176)

It is good to have Boje on our side. He is realistic about power and the limitations of resistance in a way that shows he has experience of it, as when he warns against heroics:

People, in corporate settings, often learn the hard way to only express the logic the boss most wants to hear! In a business dialog, we are rarely free to express the logic we think, feel, believe, or intuit. Nor do we engage (very often, or more than once) in emotive-ethical acts, and be that one person who speaks back to power, asking power to be answerable to what is happening to the Other....

but more often narrative control (by a boss or some dominant coalition) is so powerful, so threatening, so terrorizing, that people are mostly silent, saying and posing whatever power wants to hear and see. (p. 21)

Boje highlights the counter-memories that are subordinated to the managerialist collective memory:

Work abuse is written onto the body memory. Carpal tunnel syndrome from typing, calluses of the farm worker, back pains of the garment worker, burns on the arms of the fry clerk, nasty bruises on the legs of stewardesses pushing carts down the aisle, and so forth are remembered. (p. 93)

Nevertheless, without questioning Boje's commitment, it is worth questioning his strategies for resistance. For example, his 'antidote to McDonaldization' is much like Ritzer's (1996), 'home cook festivalism, visiting the non-chain, local restaurants, where people take their time' (p. 72). I admit to doing much the same thing, if only because my daughter and I are vegetarians, so McDonald's isn't much fun for us. But I don't really think I am challenging capitalism.

Boje criticizes founder narratives and 'the idolatry of former CEOs' (p. 88). But in their place he gives us CEOs who are real reformer-saviours, who do not need narrative control because they generate genuine stories. First there is Doug, the new CEO in one of Boje's case studies, the Gold Office Supply company, who 'in almost his first meeting with the executives uprooted a 'reserved for the CEO' (one was also reserved for each of several VPs) parking sign and threw his on the executive meeting table, demanding to know "who put up this sign? This is not the kind of leadership I will have around here"'. Boje approves of this as an example of Doug 'shaking up the ways of making sense... with some very emotive-ethical as well as answerability ethics dramatics' (p. 50). Then there is Wayne Alderson, who became VP of operations at Pittron, a steel company just outside Pittsburgh, and turned it round after a bitter strike in 1972. 'Wayne did it', Boje tells us, through a combination not only of 'economic action' but also 'spiritual action' (p. 182). Boje contends that managers can bring a 'religious/spiritual philosophy to bear on their management of people' (p. 185). He claims to have refuted the 'Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School (i.e. Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm)', which mistakenly 'rejects organizational religious or spiritual metaphysics and classifies these as ideology used to exploit the consumer culture industry' (p. 186).

Boje maintains that 'restorying of past and future is not just a matter of consultants convening storytellers in a room and asking them to pass a talking stick (or microphone)' (p. 82). But it is never quite clear whether Boje is offering a fundamental

critique of the ‘story consulting’ fad, or just another variant of it (p. 189). Boje calls up Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony:

A polyphonic strategy story is one collectively and generatively written, visualized or orally told by all the stakeholders to an organization. It is said to be the next frontier of strategy, but is so very rare, in comparison to monologic narrative. (p. 97)

It is difficult to avoid the inference that for CEOs brave enough to try it, Boje is the consultant who will give it to them straight, and help them to formulate a proper polyphonic strategy that dispenses with false images and ‘the tacit collusion of investment experts, workers, and spokespersons’ (p. 130) to create a genuine consensus. Read in this way *Storytelling Organizations* could be an inspirational challenge for management, rather than a critique.

### A roundtable with David Boje

Boje concludes by having ‘a bit of fun’ (p. 5), scripting an imaginary roundtable conversation between himself, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Stein. This prompted me to think about who I would like to invite to a seminar on organizational memory if David Boje agreed to join me. For a start, two I have already mentioned: Andrea Casey, who initiated a critique of the storage bin model of organizational memory (Casey, 1997; Nissley & Casey, 2002), and Per Hansen, who would bring a historian’s perspective on organizational culture and storytelling (Hansen, 2007). Then two newer researchers: Gabrielle Durepos, who uses actor-network-theory to trace the construction of company histories, a method she describes as ANTi-history (Durepos, 2009; Durepos et al., 2008), and Daniel Mai, whose unpublished thesis surveys a vast range of literature on collective memory in organizations, much of it not yet translated into English (Mai, 2009). I am sure David Boje could also suggest some possible participants worth inviting. I hope this proposal for a seminar makes it very clear that I see this critical review as an acknowledgement of the importance of Boje’s *Storytelling Organizations* and the new lines of research it suggests. There are few books that would be worth reading in such depth, reviewing at such length, or organizing a seminar to discuss. As with any text, multiple readings of *Storytelling Organizations* are possible. I have tried to claim it for a more critical perspective on organizational memory, as a counter to the knowledge management and story consulting fads.

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