

**Antenarration Inquiry:  
The Utrecht Lecture on Exposition**

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This talk is dialogism between narrative *and* antenarrative. Storytelling is defined here as a fragmented affair between narration and antenarration. Bits of memory and here-and-now observations were streaming through my pen onto the notebook, and now onto the keyboard. This talk is an accounting of my journal to the critical management programs in UK, France, and Netherlands; it is an “*antenarration inquiry*.”

1. Coherence of proper story (Gabriel, 2000: 20) *and* incoherence of improper story (Boje, 2001: 1).
2. Continuity of Letiche’s reading of Bergson’s *durée* *and* discontinuity of this exposition concept of antenarration.

Exposition is defined as “background information the audience needs to understand the characters and the action” (Green, Katy, 2005: 33, Mar 10, Leicester Mercury City Edition). Exposition is barely noticeable by the beholder *and* interwoven seamlessly to imply seep into your consciousness: (Green, 2005: 33).

- **Narrative > Story** - “For them to become a narrative, they require a plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole” Czarniawska (1999: 2)
- **Stories > Narrative** - “I shall argue not all narratives are stories; in particular, factual or descriptive accounts of events that aspire at objectivity rather than emotional effect must not be treated as stories” (Gabriel 2000: 5)
- **PROPER STORY DEFINITIONS:**
  - **Story** - “*Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material*” – Gabriel (2000: 239, italics in original)
  - **Story** - “A story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem” (Czarniawska, 1997: 78)

### **The debate of Boje and Gabriel**

Gabriel opened the debate commenting about my terse stories, “you know the story” in Boje (1991):

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 (Gabriel, 2000: 20, boldness is mine).

Now the debate continues—In a study of Enron spectacles, in a recent issue of *Organization Studies*, we refined our definition: “Antenarratives are bets that a pre-story can be told and theatrically performed that will enroll stakeholders in ‘intertextual’ ways transforming the world of action into theatrics” (Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman (2004: 756). Sometimes this is a terse performance, at other times quite poetic. “Organizational stories rarely achieve the depth and complexity of myths and should not be treated as part of a *mythology* (Gabriel, 2000: 6).

Here is the point I want to reflect upon: Gabriel goes on to explain (footnote 8, p. 20) why my theory does not square with the anaemic quality of the stories “extricated from 100 hours of taped interview material” (2000: 19-20). Here is footnote 8 that tells us the “truth of the story”:

The concept of dialogical truth originates in Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novel, the *non plus ultra* of dialogical consciousness that embodies all the consciousnesses of all the characters. There is no higher level of narrative that incorporates the partial narratives offered by characters. “For the author the hero is not “he” and not “I”, but a fully valued “thou”, that is, another fully fledged “I” (“Thou art”)' (Bakhtin, 1929/1973: 51).

I pulled out my Bakhtin (1929/1973: 51) book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; Turning to p. 51, I did not find anything about “the concept of dialogical truth” that Gabriel (2000: 20, footnote 8) criticized me about. I carefully reread Bakhtin (1929/1973: 51).

Immediately before the sentence Gabriel put in footnote 8 is one that I prefer: “The new artistic position of the author vis-à-vis the hero in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is a consequent and fully realized dialogical position which confirms the hero's independence, inner freedom, unfinalizedness and indeterminacy” (Bakhtin, 1929/1973: 51).

Let's look at the **anaemic** storytelling. My “you know the story: is for Gabriel a very bad, terse story, Gabriel (2000: 20) tells me, it is not an “integrated piece of narrative with a full plot and a complete cast of characters; instead they exist in a state of continuous flux, fragments, allusions, as people contribute bits, often talking together (Boje, 1991: 12-13).”

I do not think that Bakhtin or Dostoevsky would want to restrict storytelling so severely or overlook antenarrative processes. These were quite radical storytellers. For example, Bakhtin (1929/1973: 44-45) cites a segment of “*A Gentle Creature*” where Dostoevsky says:

The point is that this is not a story and not a sketch. Imagine a husband whose wife, a suicide who several hours earlier have thrown herself out a window, is laid out on a table before him. He is distraught and has not yet had time to gather his thoughts. He paces to and from one room to another trying to comprehend what has taken place, to ‘get his thoughts together. In addition, he is a confirmed hypochondriac, one of those who talk to themselves. So he talks to himself, relating what has happened, **explaining** it to himself. Despite the apparent continuity of what he says, he contradicts himself several times, both in his logic and in his emotions. He justifies himself and blames his wife; he enters into extraneous explanations, now displaying crudity of thought and of heart, now deep emotion. Gradually he does in fact explain matters to himself and does ‘get his thoughts together.’ The series of recollections which he has evoked leads him irresistably to the **truth**; the truth irresistably edifies his mind and his heart. Toward the end even the tone of the story is modified, in relation to its disorderly beginning. The truth reveals itself rather clearly and definitively to the bereaved, or at least it seems so to him.

Such is the theme. Of course the action of the story takes place over several hours, with fits and starts and in a confused and erratic form: first he speaks to himself, then he addresses an invisible listener, as if addressing a judge.

### **Critical Antenarration Inquiry**

Corporations are engaged in exposition to seamlessly write globalization onto our consciousness; fortunately for our inquiry, they are rather clunky expositors; their stitching and weaving of antenarration with patches of narration is not always seamlessly seeping into our consciousness.

Exposition by storytelling organizations is a clunky expositor’s hailing, “hey you there!” (See Derrida’s book *On Hospitality*; see Campbell Jones, 2005). There is an arch in the one of expositor’s voice at McDonald’s. It is the exposition of a golden arch, an arch of corporate intent antenarrating a reply to an invisible interrogator’s acquisition. The invisible inquisitor is like Dostoevsky’s invisible stenographer. We trace how the expositor-corporation authors, directors, and characters reply to the invisible interrogator. It is the kind of dialogism that Dostoevsky writes about in “*A Gentle Creature*.”

For example, McDonald’s clunky exposition is not so seamless when it says “Betrokken ondernemen” (engaged entrepreneur) and “grote maatschappelijke: (large societal engagement), that McDonald’s has “ein milieubewuste” (environmental conscience). This bit of McDonald’s antenarration is clunky exposition, and it is a “bet” that it can be

a reply to an interrogation that took place by a Netherlands activist that was on TV some time before being embedded in the brochure printed September, 2004.

The brochure contains three double narrations (defined by Bakhtin, 1981 as one narrator's intent mouthed by a second narrator). Just as the three double narrations come into focus, the antenarrative traces that prompted their answers to interruption of interrogations become forgotten.

Antenarration and narration are in a struggle, a debate between Gabriel and me; it is emblematic of the lust for coherence and the desire for antenarrative coherence. I think anemic stories, terse stories and clunky antenarrative exposition is an important aspect of storytelling, albeit and improper storytelling. Narrative theory domination over story, to marginalize antenarration, to be all powerful over what is and is not story is an important inquiry.

Today's talk on critical antenarrative inquiry is the beginning of a critical antenarratology that has yet to be written.

### **Critical Antenarratology**

I define "critical antenarratology" as *in situ* interrogation of the architectonics of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic metaphisicality (Bakhtin, 1990, Kant, 1553). Critical antenarratology is an inquiry into relationships between narration and antenarration, between storyteller and expositor, between researchers and researched. The lust for cohesion and the desire for dis cohesion is a dialogic relationship. It is an interrelationship for forgetability and answerability, an intertextuality between cognitive forgetting, ethic answerability, accomplished *in situ* in aesthetic consummation.

As I travel between countries I become more literate, tracing a critical antenarrative weave with a new methodology. I am able sometimes to read the antenarrative weaving, tracing the trajectories *in situ*, in the time/space of each locality.

I propose this new methodology of clunky exposition tracing, the architectonics of footsteps, the here-and-now interweaving of continuity and discontinuity as well as coherence and incoherence in the telling and not telling that is telling about storytelling organizations. This is an exploration of heteroglossia, of the dialogism of multi-stylistics, diverse chronotopicities, the intervibration of ethics, cognitive and aesthetic spheres. The methodology allows explorations of complexity, emergence, systems theory, and corporate strategy in new ways.

I have in mind a kind of cubism, to be more accurate, a soft cubism methodology of critical antenarrative inquiry. Gertrude Stein's (1935) third lecture on narration to the university of Chicago was about her attempts at cubist writing. To me this relates to John Kriznac's play, *Tamara*, about the artist Tamara de Lampikita, a soft cubism painter in Paris. Kriznac tells me he wrote his play as an inquiry into fascism, an antenarrative in our terms, that intermingles the cognitive, ethical, and aesthetics. His theatre asks the Bakhtinian question, should a rich and successful and influential soft cubism portrait painter be answerable for not using her art to critique fascism. Kriznac does not cite Bakhtin or Stein; yet they are each relevant.

Are we in this room answerable as beholders of the authors, characters, and directors of fascism in this our time? I think that I am answerable for Nike, Disney, McDonald's and the postmodern war that is Iraq and a U.S democracy that has turned from Empire to Imperialism and Fascism.

Antenarration is exposition that is in answer to invisible inquisitors, to forgotten accusations. It is a here-and-now answer to Gabriel, Stein, Kriznac, de Lampikita, and Bakhtin. It is no use whining that my storytelling is not coherent, and therefore cannot be a proper story. Improper storytelling seeps hegemonic ooze onto our collective consciousness. I am incoherent on purpose. I refuse to be only coherent.

Storytelling is also antenarration; storytelling I am tracing is oftentimes missing beginning, middle or ending; these are left out on purpose by storytelling organizations; they do not abide proper storytelling rules. Storytelling is not just about linearity or non-linearity; it is both, and an interrelationship. The result is a dance between linear narrative restriction and antenarrative nonlinearity; and in that dance are patterns we can interpret using complexity theory; why, because the dance is emergence, complexity, the 3<sup>rd</sup> cybernetics is the dialogical one we imagine this day.

Gabriel says my storytelling is anemic. Yesterday, I was told I was violating audience expectations about proper storytelling in presentation. And, I was asked if I did this on purpose. I think it is more a question of what I mean by story, its dance of coherence and incoherence, and spaces of nothingness.

If I do not give enough cognitive coherence today, if you get lost, unable to follow an aesthetic consummation or some ethical twist and turn, please hold me answerable.

Leaving blanks and holes in the storytelling is very important to exposition. Pauses, gaps, silences, stops, and starts are important clunky aspects of exposition. How may blanks make up a story? Not too many blanks, or the bet of the exposition cannot be appreciated by you. Even proper storytelling shoots blanks (tracer rounds). Blanks are also gaps where the listener fills in the blanks between the lines with their own inside-the-head storytelling.

**The difference between story, narrative, and antenarrative: there are many and there are important interrelationships**

“Proper story” is such a cruel and dogmatic imperative on storytelling, and it is an unnecessary blinder on the potentiality of storytelling, put in play by Gabriel (2000). Indeed I would say Gabriel is engaged in a gamble, a bet that story can be restricted in this or that way. And my “improper story” is a bet that story can be liberated to include this and those other ways. So why not both or all ways. All ways is perhaps too wide, there must be some extra-story space and some story space, but I think that is a matter for inquiry.

Gertrude Stein (1931/1973: 33) in *How to Write*, says this about, what is a story: “wild and while.” I like the image of wild and for a while. Story, to me, keeps changing and rearranging. Story picks up and sheds context, characters, twists, and turns along its trajectory, until the story dies. Perhaps the story dies when it is too rigidly told, too cumbersome to recall, too embarrassing to retell, or some other way of telling is more popular (but that is part of trajectory). Corporations, or more accurately, storytelling organizations, in Stein’s poetic language: do not do what they say they will do when they start out to do what they are about to do” (Stein, Narration Lecture 3, 1935: 339).

Can antenarrators (or narrators) narrate coherence without the exposition? Can there be coherence without the interplay with incoherence? Does coherence masquerade as incoherence, and vice versa? Can there be continuity without discontinuity? Can there be a tidy proper story without all the messy, clunky wandering of seamless-seeking antenarration? Can only a seamless proper story seep into your consciousness?

Like Cézanne’s paintings, I leave some bare patches in my storytelling, traces of antenarration, and bet you will just fill the blanks in with your own experience.

Stein’s narration is for me, more about antenarration. Stein rejects Aristotle’s poetics of progressive time, and the single perspective point that Gabriel seem quite fond of locating a centripetal centering, less fond of centrifugal unwinding decentering, or including a lot of tellers and ways of telling (my reading for sure). Stein, on the other hand, rejects what she calls the developmental story, and opts instead for what I will call a soft cubist antenarration.

### **Soft Cubist Antenarration**

From time to time, there is a linear coherent storytelling, a tidy bit left for you to discover in some transactions. I think these are rare jems. I think there are other gems that are less tidy, or gems that initially look like rocks. It is in the eye of the beholder, the knowledge of context, the ability to inquire intertextually, that makes a tersely told antenarration a gem. The more important point from cubism is to get to the here-and-now, or to take moments in varied time, and put them on one here-and-now plane. Cubism is also about answerability, and a different kind of consummation, a cubist aesthetics, with lots of bare spots, and a rather clunky exposition. Soft cubism is more stylized, more sensual, the shapes a bit less linearly, and more curvatus. At least that is how the soft cubism of Tamara de Lampikita appears to me.

The co-telling and co-listening is what you and I are doing here-and-now. Some of you are listening intently; others are listening hardly at all. Some give the appearance of listening. Some are telling themselves a story while I am telling you a story; some of these parallel tellings (me outside, you inside) are disconnected, some are quite interconnective. The blanks allow you to fill in at the same time I am blanking as a way of telling and not telling.

While you are telling inside yourself, I am telling outside what is happening inside yourself; I can only imagine what is going on in your head. Stein puts it this way:

“Everybody is always telling everything and anybody can in their way go on listening or not go on listening” (Narrative Lecture 3: 343).

Storytelling is an event. There is a world (here-and-now) a relativity of time place, an intersect of inside the head and outside the head, to co-listening, the co-telling that we are doing.

*In situ* antenarration inquiry explores the temporal and spatial continuity and discontinuity, the cohesion and incohesion, the solidarity and fragmentation, the composition and decomposition of storytelling organizations; and how one pretends to be the other...

### **McDonald's Antenarration with some clunky expositioning**

How daring is McDonald's claim in Netherlands, UK and France? “Betrokken ondernemen: (engaged entrepreneur); UK McDonald's (2003/4) exposition “come and play: an hour of moderate exercise a day will help a child's healthy development: so why not “mix and match: and “why not try these balanced McDonald's Happy Meal combinations?” (UK, 2004), or in France “L'Anniversaire chez McDoanld's c'est facile!” or “Le wouaaanniversaire, c'est genial pour les enfants mais aussi tres facile pur les parents!” (McDo, France, 2005).

These are multi-stylistic, visual, textual, bits of skaz that mist with stylized bits of nutrition science, and some photos of smiling people or a smiling clown. The stylistics interanimate in an exposition that is interactive, and mostly very clunky, and not very seamless. Fortunately for our inquiry there is a trial of clunky seamless exposition, and it does not seep into our consciousness without some alarms sounding in our head. There is an archy tone in Golden Arches, a way of telling that is text and visual, and it is a daring hubris.

McDonald's spends 1.4 billion a year on its advertising; much of this advertising is to children.

Bits of McDonald's confidential operations manual are now on the web. The manual states:

“Ronald loves McDonald's and McDonald's food. And so do children because they love Ronald. Remember children exert a phenomenal influence when it comes to restaurant selection. This means you should do everything you can to appeal to children's love for Ronald and McDonald's” (source: McShit.com web site).

What about enrolling employees in the happiness script of McDonald's labor process, its denial of McJob:

“We sold them a dream and paid them as little as possible” (Ray Kroc).

“We couldn’t actually pay any lower wages without falling foul of the law” says Sid Nicholson, McDonald’s UK, VP (source: McShit.com web site).

There are unions in McDonald’s Netherlands, a requirement of law, and as I am told the unions in the over 200 McDonald’s here, are like other ones, defanged and domesticated. Still one can say there are unions at Netherlands McDonald’s a claim that I do not think can be made elsewhere in the world. There are stories I could tell now about the ways unions are broken, how antenarrating is used quite skillfully to break a unionizing attempt, how stories are taught to managers at Hamburger University, how experts are dispatched to break any such attempt, as soon as the word union is used by an employee, and what happens to those employees, or restaurant sites elsewhere that vote union; you know those stories.

### **The Tapestry of Critical Antenarratology**

Strands of narrative *and* antenarrative are interwoven, raveling *and* deraveling, weaving *and* unweaving in storytelling organizations. Critical antenarratology is a method to trace and deconstruct an ongoing interweaving antenarrating this is always composing and self-deconstructing.

Critical antenarratology questions and problematizes the global and local interweaving of corporate narration and antenarration. The tapestry of globalization unravels as fast as it ravel, thanks in part to anti-globalization. Unraveled sections are restoried into new sections, stitched and weaved in unfinalizedness with emergent sections, in an unmergedness. The weaving is intertextual, it is answerability of a strange kind, and a sort of interrogation.

Our inquiry traces the antenarrative trajectories, the clunky exposition is somewhat traceable. It is rhizomatics of faciality, white walls, cracking, and black holes. Out of the blanks, the gaps and the bare canvass, and all those black holes comes a cracking that blemishes the white wall, cracking and breaking it apart, tearing apart the weave.

Antenarration acts on coherence and incoherence, and the masquerade each is of the other. Here and there nodes of unraveling patches, gaps in the sectioning of tapestry, seams, are undone and unravel, while there occurs re-raveling, repairs that do not quite cover the damage. This is a sort of phenomenal complexity (see Letiche, 2003).

So much incoherence, discontinuity, fragmentation, gaps, and blanks that there is little story space for coherence, continuity, solidarity, seamless exposition, or composition that is proper.

Storytelling is weaving, some of it seamless, most of it not.

All of a sudden the old woman pauses here weaving, recalling a way of telling she never had the courage to tell anyone, and not even to herself. She is not telling a story she never could voice this story. She weaves a way of telling and a way of not telling and you experience something that may be terrifying to hear her about to tell, yet she is compelled to begin to tell.

As she stitches you begin seeing the bare spots, and cannot postpone your inclination to weave your own horrific experience into the blanks. No pathetic empathy, but a ripping sympathetic co-experience of an oppression you image in the same as the one she see in her pregnant pause, in the twinkle of her eye, in the way her breathing has changed: you know the story. She says in that moment of telling and not telling, an entire life history, and yet this is not telling, she expects you to tell it for her, to draw it out of her. You weave your empathetic experience, one that substitutes for listening, and is not at all relevant to her life, yet the vibrations within your telling meet a rhythm that she dares not express, a pace of breathing, a way of turning away, or a way of looking you in the eye. You are two weavers, teller and listener, no you are now just two tellers, pausing to reflect on an abyss. The abyss is inside and between you and you seek to reestablish the interweave that is keeping you both from falling into the abyss. You cross stitch, you create a net, a web, a safe protective covering. You start and stop listening, you wander to another piece, you get away from the edge, but there too is another edge, a worse abyss awaits you. She ahs led you to it. The tapestry is unraveling again. Something monstrous lurks beneath.

Ravel and unravel, stitch and weave, dissolve and repair; you cannot stop the unraveling, you keep weaving it all together, but it is too much for you to handle. You spin the weaves, the weaves spin you. The step out of time and space. You are inside and outside, between as well.

Some people will pull on a loose thread, to unravel an antenarrative, or to see what pattern emerges when this strand gets a tug. The tapestry is coming undone. Stories do not last forever. Stories die. There is a story death, when people no longer perform a way of telling, no longer listen to a way of telling. There are so many ways of telling that get all tangled together. It is not all messy, improper, but it is better than no weave at all.

References available on request [dboje@nmsu.edu](mailto:dboje@nmsu.edu)  
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