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Introduction to Deconstructing Las Vegas

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We went to Las Vegas and deconstructed everything. The purpose of our deconstruction was more than critique, we see deconstruction as something that happens to Las Vegas, and we also think it is always reconstructing. As an introduction to our special issue, I seek to provide some background into deconstruction as a artful analysis, and as a process that happens all around us.

We, the authors of this special issue, took a trip to Las Vegas to deconstruct all that we experienced. Our trip took place from March 30 to April 2, 2000 while at the critical postmodern track of the International Academy of Business Disciplines¹.

Should we define deconstruction? Defining deconstruction or laying out steps as in **Table 1** is contrary to the spirit of Derrida's idea. Nevertheless, I can not avoid the temptation, so I will define deconstruction as a "double." It is two ideas. Deconstruction is both phenomenon and analysis. It is phenomenon because "Las Vegas deconstruction" is all the constructing and reconstructing processes happening all around not only the city, but also its imitation in cities around the world. Deconstruction is also analysis, as I have come to understand it. I follow Derrida in looking at how Las Vegas is already deconstructing all on its own, we only come to observe and trace between the lines of processes already in motion. Las Vegas is already unraveling, it is a complexity of movements, and our readings are just one more disturbance. People always ask for a definition of deconstruction. I try to avoid such questions, but if I must, I turn to Martin (1990: 340). She defines deconstruction:

«as an analytic strategy that exposes in a systematic way multiple ways a text can be interpreted. Deconstruction is able to reveal ideological assumptions in a way that is particularly sensitive to the suppressed interests of members of disempowered, marginalized groups.»

Derrida contends that deconstruction is not a philosophy, or a method, nor is it a periodizing phase or a moment (1999: 65). Rather, deconstruction happens. It is like the entropy that is all around us. Within organization studies, to paraphrase Derrida (1999: 72) there is a history of concepts that are being transformed, deconstructed, criticized,

¹. See <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/deconvegash.html>

2. If you want to play with deconstruction, go to <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/sto.html> for an interactive study guide.

and improved. For me, deconstruction is a poststructuralist epistemology, not a formula-method with steps and procedures. In this special issue we have each deconstructed Las Vegas in our own way using different ideological assumptions. Derrida (1999: 74) says the «strategy of deconstruction is I interpret a way [to] understand micro-power and what powers may be in such and such a context» (Boje, 2001). Deconstruction is strategy, not a method, and traces the micro-power of textual process, exposing centralizing and unraveling aspects, making less visible aspects more apparent².

Our main contribution is to see Las Vegas as already deconstructing, rather than applying some formulaic analysis and calling that deconstruction. We have one common theme. Las Vegas is the ultimate spectacle of production and consumption in a deconstructing world (Debord, 1967; Best and Kellner, 1997). Spectators go to Vegas to take more active roles in their own leisure activities than they would at a Disney theme park. Yet, upon arriving at Las Vegas the spectacle is an amalgam of Disneyfication, McDonalidization, and Hollywoodification. And cities everywhere are imitating what is being called Las Vegetization, the combination of theme park with casinos and the sex industry.

Table 1. Story Deconstruction Guidelines[†]

1. **Duality Search.** Make a list of any bipolar terms, any dichotomies that are used in the story. Include the term even if only one side is mentioned. For example, in male-centered and or male-dominated organization stories, men are central and women are marginal others. One term mentioned implies its partner.
2. **Reinterpret the Hierarchy.** A story is one interpretation or hierarchy of an event from one point of view. It usually has some form of hierarchical thinking in place. Explore and reinterpret the hierarchy (e.g., in the duality terms how one dominates the other) so you can understand its grip.
3. **Rebel Voices.** Deny the authority of the one voice. Narrative centers marginalize or exclude. To maintain a center takes enormous energy. What voices are not being expressed in this story? Which voices are subordinate or hierarchical to other voices (e.g., Who speaks for the trees?)?
4. **Other side of the story.** Stories always have two or more sides. What is the side of the story (usually a marginalized, under-represented, or even silent)? Reverse the story, but putting the bottom on top, the marginal in control, or the back stage up front. For example, reverse the male-center, by holding a spot light on its excesses until it becomes a female center. In telling the other side, the point is not to replace one center with another, but to show how each center is in a constant state of change and disintegration.
5. **Deny the Plot.** Stories have plots, scripts, scenarios, recipes, and morals. Turn these around (move from romantic to tragic or comedic to ironic).
6. **Find the Exception.** What is the exception that breaks the rule that does not fit the recipe that escapes the strictures of the principle. State the rule in a way that makes it seem extreme or absurd.
7. **Trace what is between the lines.** Trace what is not said. Trace what is the writing on the wall. Fill in the blanks. Storytellers frequently use "you know that part of the story." Trace what you are filling in. With what alternate way could you fill it in? (E.g., trace to the context, the back stage, the between, the intertext).
8. **Resituate.** The point of doing 1 to 7 is to find a new perspective, one that resituates the story beyond its dualisms, excluded voices, or singular viewpoint. The idea is to reauthor the story so that the hierarchy is resituated and a new balance of views is attained. Restory to remove the dualities and margins. In a resituated story there are no more centers. Restory to script new actions.

[†] Deconstructing student's field interviews with managers. An example adapted from Boje and Dennehy (1993: Appendix A), which contains a 7-part story deconstruction method. I have extended "Deny the Plot" by posing an eighth move.

Spectacle is visible everywhere in the advertising extravaganza along the Strip, from the four-story coke bottle that houses digital Storytelling Theater to a MGM turned into Disney. Now Las Vegas is colonizing Malls and Airports. We can see spectacle as the Digital Storytelling Theater, most clearly presented in Disneyland, but also on the Las Vegas strip with the Luxor, Caesar's Palace, Mirage; in spectacles in our living room, like the Super Bowl (with digitized advertising superimposed on the field of play and Reebok icon-jerseys battling with Nike icons).

Beneath this illusion and architectural facade lies brutality, cruelty and inhumanity to animals, humans, and mother earth. «Spectacle is both micro, strange events we tune into here and there, but parts to fashion more macro spectacles, like Las Vegas and Disneyland, and more macro patterns of the very logic of late schizophrenic, postmodern capitalism that has colonized our being and our landscape» (Boje, forthcoming).

The disciplines we represent include popular culture, philosophy, business, sociology, organization theory, marketing, and communication studies. One trend across these disciplines is the postmodern turn, another is the rise in critical theory analysis of consumption, and finally in looking at what spectacles like Las Vegas do to our live space. Another trend we see is how people are being invited to participate in the spectacle of their own consumption. You can see this in Elvis Presley weddings at Las Vegas, in Renaissance fairs where people dress in Victorian costume, and in the varied ways people are experimenting in temporary life modes. Las Vegas is a place that caters to temporary and more or less safe spectacles of consumption.

Las Vegas of the 1960s is not the Las Vegas of the 2000s. Las Vegas is the Postmodern City of Casinos and Simulation, emblematic of a transformation of the spectacle of production and consumption that is being globalized. Las Vegas, long the casino gambling capital of America, began to go through a transformation in the late 1980s that revealed what much of postmodern America is becoming. As other parts of the nation started to compete with it by legalizing gambling, the city started to reinvent itself in the image of Disney (Boje, 1995), creating hotels that were also vast simulations and themed environments. In the new Las Vegas casino, the managers have MBAs, and are charging higher hotel and meal rates than their gangland predecessors. The new Las Vegas Disneyfies in order to attract the family as customer, and attempts to marginalize the Strip Clubs to off-the-Strip.

Las Vegas is the new theatrics of consumption. The Las Vegas «theater of consumption» (Firat and Dholakia, 1998) is strangely related to the «global theater of signs» (Lyotard, 1997: 105), both are performances portending a new order of things, both a paradox of standardized and fragmented global culture. The simultaneous stage production varies between global transnational productions and locally originated theatrics. In postmodern global theater, «people move in an out of relationships and situations that they belong to, temporality and affectivity. In a similar vein people are members of temporary or momentary communities (...) the creation of multiple alternative com-

munities to the market society that will produce the alternative to the market: the society of the theater, the theater of life» (Firat and Dholakia, 1998: 155).

To me, Las Vegas enacts a storytelling theater to persuade us that the fragments of our fractured lives and the fragmentation of nature itself is whole and not fragmented at all.

I will not introduce each of the articles and their authors. I prefer to let you surf the links and construct your own experience. Enjoy deconstructing our deconstructions of Las Vegas self-deconstructing.

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