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on the construction of strategy narratives  
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# Strategy and chronotopes: a Bakhtinian perspective on the construction of strategy narratives

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of studies focusing on the discursive aspects of strategy and strategizing (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Vaara, 2010; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Balogun et al., 2014). Storytelling and narratives are generally seen as important parts of strategizing and strategic 'sensemaking' but in-depth studies of strategy narratives have been relatively scarce (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 2008; Fenton & Langley, 2011). However, in a landmark analysis, Barry and Elmes (1997) highlighted the role of fiction in narratives and showed that today's strategies are based on ancient narrative structures. Boje (2008) illustrated how strategy literature provides alternative bases for understanding strategy and the construction of strategy narratives. Fenton and Langley (2011) in turn argued that multiple levels and forms of narrative are inherent to strategic practices.

The purpose of this paper is to expand on this previous work by elucidating the processes through which understandings of time and space are constructed in strategy narratives. This is itself an important issue, in view of the lack of studies, either in management in general or strategy research in particular, that take the notion of time seriously (Zaheer, Albert & Zaheer, 1999; Ancona, Okhuyesen & Perlow, 2001; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Furthermore, without an understanding of how temporality is constructed in various types of narrative, we cannot fully comprehend the ways in which narratives enable or constrain strategic sensemaking.

For this purpose, we draw on Mikhael Bakhtin's notions of time and place as well as the works of Gary Morson and David Boje. This helps us to go beyond chronological notions of time and to focus on 'literary time' in strategy narratives. We argue that strategy narratives involve various genres, with 'chronotopes' characteristic to each genre combining specific senses of time and place. This means that narratives of the past, the present and the future are based on resources that enable but also constrain these constructions. We also maintain that these constructions are articulated in 'antenarratives' – fragments of discourse that may or may not become widely shared or institutionalized narratives (Boje, 2008, 2011). These antenarratives are 'bets', some of which may succeed and become institutionalized

parts of organizational strategy. Thus, we can understand how certain constructions of organizational objectives become taken-for-granted parts of organizational strategy.

## **STRATEGY AS NARRATIVE**

Strategy scholars have focused increasing attention on the role of language in strategy and strategizing (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Hendry, 2000; Samra-Fredericks, 2005; Seidl, 2007; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013). Despite the proliferation of narrative analysis in more general management and organizational studies (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001; Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2011), there have been relatively few studies of strategy narratives or strategic storytelling. An early analysis elaborating on the role of stories in strategizing was provided by Broms and Gahmberg (1983) who showed how organizational strategizing can be seen as auto-communication based on storytelling. In other words, strategy to a large extent involves the ritualized repetition of specific narratives of organizational identity. Barry and Elmes (1997) emphasized the fictive nature of the narratives: 'as authors of fiction, strategists are subject to the same basic challenge facing other fictionalist writers: how to develop an emerging compelling account, one that readers can willingly buy into and implement. Any story that the strategist tells is but one of many competing alternatives woven from a vast array of possible characterizations, plot lines, and themes' (p. 6). By drawing on Shlovsky, they point out that any compelling narrative has to achieve two fundamental objectives: credibility (or believability) and defamiliarization (or novelty). Materiality, voice, perspective, ordering, setting and readership-targeting are among the key devices used to enhance credibility. To achieve novelty, there is a need for various kinds of strategy narratives because 'readers have shifting preferences and attention spans' (Barry & Elmes, 1997: 11). The narrative types that they identify are epic narratives (dramatic, heroic tales), technofuturist narratives (complex and detailed 'quasi-scientific' texts) and purist narratives (defamiliarizing, almost atemporal stories).

Boje (2008) proposed that strategy literature provides specific bases for the construction of strategy narratives. He distinguishes the following alternative forms of strategy narratives: 'Greek romantic', 'everyday', 'analytic biographic', 'chivalric', 'reversal of historical realism', 'clown-rogue-fool', 'Rabelaisian purge', 'basis for Rabelaisian', 'idyllic' and 'castle room'. In his analysis, he speaks of 'chronotopes', a Bakhtinian concept that we will come back to later. In general, Boje's analysis highlights that strategy is and should be told in multiple voices and through multiple stories.

Fenton and Langley (2011) elaborate on the central role of narratives in practical strategy. They argue that narratives can be found in the micro-stories of organizational members, in the techniques of strategizing, in the accounts people provide of their work and in the various artefacts produced by strategizing. To date, we have, however, seen few works that take a narrative perspective on strategy. A rare example is provided by Dunford and Jones' analysis (2000) of the way organizational changes were made sense of in three organizations. The stories differed but they all included specific anchors through which meanings were given to the past, present and future. In

their analysis of organizational changes, Brown and Humphreys (2003) found that senior managers explained events in narratives of epic change, whereas two groups of employees provided tragic narratives. Küpers, Mantere and Statler (2013) examined strategy as a lived experience. They identified three narrative practices enacted during a workshop event: discursive struggles over 'hot' words, the de-sacralization of strategy and recurring rituals of self-sacrifice. Vesa and Franck (2013) in turn examined how managers experience strategy as a collection of 'in situ vectors' of the future. They identified three types of vectors in their analysis – unquestioned, resolute and fragmented experiential vectors – and demonstrated that these vectors are constantly present in strategy work.

Despite these advances, there is a paucity of knowledge about the alternative ways in which the past, present and the future are constructed in these strategy narratives. This is why we now turn to literary narrative analysis to develop a 'literary time' perspective on strategy narratives, to highlight the chronotopes in strategy narratives and to map out how specific conceptions of organizational objectives in time and space emerge from antenarrative storytelling.

## **STRATEGY NARRATIVES AND LITERARY TIME**

Time can be understood in different ways. In organization and strategy studies, the focus has usually been on chronological time. Several studies have examined how time (and its scales, rhythms and patterns) plays an important role in organizational change (Gersick, 1989; Van de Ven & Polley, 1992; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Zaheer, Albert & Zaheer, 1999). Zaheer, Albert and Zaheer (1999), for example, concentrated on time scales and argued that the specification of the relevant time scale is as crucial as the specification of level or unit of analysis in organizational research. Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) found that successful companies managed to link the present and future together through rhythmic time-spaced transition processes. Others have analyzed how time is subject to different interpretations in different organizations (Staudemayer, Tyre & Perlow, 2002; Cox & Hassard, 2007). For instance, Staudemayer, Tyre and Perlow (2002) suggested that temporal shifts change collective experiences in a fundamental manner. Cox and Hassard (2007) in turn focused on retrospective methods in organizational research. They argued that the past is reconstructed in organizational research in four ways: controlling the past, interpreting the past, co-opting the past, and representing the past. Although these and other studies have thus provided important insights into the role of time in organizations, we lack understanding of how exactly the future – and consequently the present and past – are constructed in strategizing.

For this purpose, we suggest that it is useful to move from a chronological perspective on time to a meaning-based approach. Ricœur (1988) is probably the most well-known philosopher of time in narratives. He defines two concepts of historical time: cosmic time, the time of the world, and phenomenological time, the time of our lives. In his book *Time and Narrative* (Ricœur 1988), he argues that cosmic time can become phenomenological time to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative mode, and narrative attains

its full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence. Central to Ricœur's understanding of narrative time is its capacity to represent the human experience of time. Ricœur points out that we experience time in two different ways. We make sense of time as linear succession when we observe the passing hours and days and the progression of our lives from birth to death. This is cosmological time: time expressed in the metaphor of the 'river' of time. The other is phenomenological time: time experienced in terms of the meaning of the past, present and future.

These two conceptions of time have often been seen as opposites, but Ricœur argues that they share a relationship of mutual presupposition. The order of 'past-present-future' within phenomenological time presupposes the succession characteristic of cosmological time. The past is always before the present, which is always after the past and before the future. The order of succession is invariable, and this order is not part of the concepts of past, present or future, which are considered merely as existential orientations. On the other hand, within cosmological time, the identification of supposedly anonymous instants of time as 'before' and 'after' within the succession borrows from the phenomenological orientation to past and future. Ricœur thereby argues that any understanding of time is linked to an understanding of human existence and interpretations.

The importance of this view on time is obvious for strategy narratives. The very idea in strategy is to create images of the future that can serve as compelling objectives for organizational actors and activities. While constructing the future, one also explicitly or implicitly defines the present and the past by focusing attention on specific ideas and thus creating particular meanings. The point is that future 'visions', 'missions', 'dreams' and other such constructions define time by the events, goals or targets that are set for the future and by the references to the present or past. This is not chronological time, but a combination of cosmological and phenomenological time.

The Russian literary philosopher Mikhael Bakhtin has spoken about 'literary time', time as it is constructed in literature (Bakhtin, 1981). In this paper, we use this term to refer to the temporal dimension of strategy narratives in their textual form. This notion is similar to Ricœur's understanding of time, but it emphasizes the linkage to literary forms of presentation and their enabling and constraining features, thus enabling us to elaborate on the role of time and temporality in different types of narratives and genres.

## **GENRES AND CHRONOTOPES IN STRATEGY NARRATIVES**

Strategy narratives have to be linked with the conditions of their production. Bakhtin introduced the term 'chronotope' to analyze the spatio-temporal basis of all narratives and other linguistic acts. In Greek, 'chronos' means time and 'topos' place. The term is developed in Bakhtin's essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' (Bakhtin, 1981). The initial idea was that the chronotope underlines that time cannot be understood without a spatial dimension. In other words, in a chronotope, time and space are intertwined (Pedersen 2009). In this view, the chronotope is a unit of analysis for studying language according to characteristics of the temporal and spatial categories

represented in language (Morson & Emerson, 1990: 366). Morson and Emerson put it as follows: 'Bakhtin's crucial point is that time and space vary in qualities; different social activities and representations of those activities presume different kinds of time and space. Time and space are therefore not just 'mathematical abstractions'' (Morson & Emerson, 1990: 367).

The key point for our purposes is that specific chronotopes characterize particular literary genres, which can each serve as bases for different organizational strategy narratives. Bakhtin distinguished six types of literary genre: the Greek romance, the adventure novel of everyday life, the biography, the chivalric romance, the Rabelaisian novel (Rogue, Clown and Fool), and the idyllic novel. Each of these genres involve specific understandings of space, time and characteristic chronotopes as summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Literary genres and chronotopes in Bakhtin's analysis

Literary genre	Space	Time	Chronotope
Greek romance	An abstract alien, golden age world	Adventure time of the future	The encounter
Adventure of everyday life	The real and concrete events of everyday life	Time of the present	The road
Biography	The public square	Real life combining past and present	The real time
Chivalric romance	A miraculous dream world in nature	Miraculous past time	The beauty of the nature
Rabelaisian novel (roque, clown and fool)	Plays and dramas including body, clothing, food, drink, sex, death, defecation	Productive growth of future and possible time	The threshold
Idyllic novel	Family territory, unity of space	Idyllic and folkloric past time	The family idyll

In the Greek romance, the focus is on an alien imaginary in the 'golden age'. This is a time of adventure. For Bakhtin, its chronotope is 'the encounter', which is seen as the most abstract and static of them all (Bakhtin, 1981: 91). The adventure novel of everyday life fuses the course of an individual's life (and its major turning points) with the actual concrete spaces that he or she visits. The time is the moment of time – in the present. The chronotope is 'the road'. The biography unfolds in a real life chronotope at 'the public square' where the focus is on how people understand themselves and others by combining the past, present and the future. In the chivalric romance, the focus is on a miraculous world in an adventurous past time. The chronotope is 'the nature', but, in this genre what is miraculous becomes normal, including a fantastic understanding of animals (horses) and nature. The fifth literary genre is related to the function of the rogue, clown and fool in novels. Bakhtin describes how these figures are exposed in Rabelais' novels (François Rabelais, c. 1494 – April 9, 1553) that focus on human bodies, food, drink and drunkenness, sex, death, and defecation. What is unique in the Rabelaisian novel is that time is collective – it is differentiated and measured only by the events of collective life. This points to the possible in time and the future of time. The last genre is the idyllic novel. In this genre, idyllic life – composed of

love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink – is inseparable from places such as the home and often focuses on the past.

Morson has explained how time and space are linked in the different literary genres: 'In Greek romances, there are no moments of choice, because fate determines all. Things happen to the hero and heroine; 'the initiative in this time does not belong to human beings.' In adventure time, there are occasional nodes of pure freedom separated by mechanical causal consequence. But in contrast, in the every day novel, every moment contains a small measure of choice. This prosaic concept of time, in which a small but real measure of choice exists at every instant, characterizes the novelistic chronotope and differentiates it from other narrative forms. It also leads to a moral emphasis not on dramatic decisions at great moments, the stuff of romance, adventure, and the heroic, but on small decisions at every ordinary moment' (Morson, 1994: 367).

In terms of strategy narratives, the point is that all these genres and chronotopes can serve as a basis for the construction of organizational strategies. As mentioned, Barry and Elmes (1997) distinguished between the epic, technofuturist and purist narrative types of. Boje (2008), in turn, classified the different literary genres in two types: adventure chronotopes (Greek romantic, everyday, analytic biographic, chivalric) and folkloric chronotopes (reversal of historical realism, clown-rogue-fool, Rabelaisian purge, basis for Rabelaisian, idyllic, and castle room) to point out how strategies can be constructed in very differently in different 'strategy schools'. However, in our view there is no need to stop there; there are probably more genres and chronotopes that play a role in the narrative construction of organizational strategies. In particular, 'everyday time' can offer a new perspective on strategy work and help recognize the importance of small decisions in the present instead of only focusing on the future or the past.

Different narrative forms often give competing versions of an organization's strategy. For example, an idyllic tale of a positive future can be challenged by critics using the examples of works from more Rabelaisian genres. The crucial point is that different genres involve different chronotopes; different versions of an organization's strategy narratives construct different types of time and place for strategic decision-making and the strategists. For example, a company's strategy can be described in 'everyday time' by referring to the real life actions of the CEO. In such narratives, 'the road' is a frequent chronotope, allowing one to envision strategy as a trajectory of one person's actions (Ganser, Puhlinger & Rheindorf, 2006). The official strategy of the company can in turn be a Greek romance or even a chivalric story that reconstructs miraculous events in a kind of dream world, creating an envisioned trajectory for the future. This can also involve nostalgia and references to the 'good old times'. Finally, Rabelaisian time can provide a basis for constructions of strategy that emphasize the collective, open, roleplaying and participative aspects of strategizing. This can involve references to special collective experiences such as the Christmas party or a very successful away day, but also to more colorful carnivalistic storytelling that goes beyond what is usually seen as appropriate strategy or strategizing. McDonalds, for instance, uses the image of the clown as a carnivalistic figure in its strategy narratives, constructing a powerful, humorous, playful tale, resistant to critics (Boje, Driver & Cai, 2005).

## **ANTENARRATIVES, LIVING STORIES AND INSTITUTIONALIZED STRATEGIES**

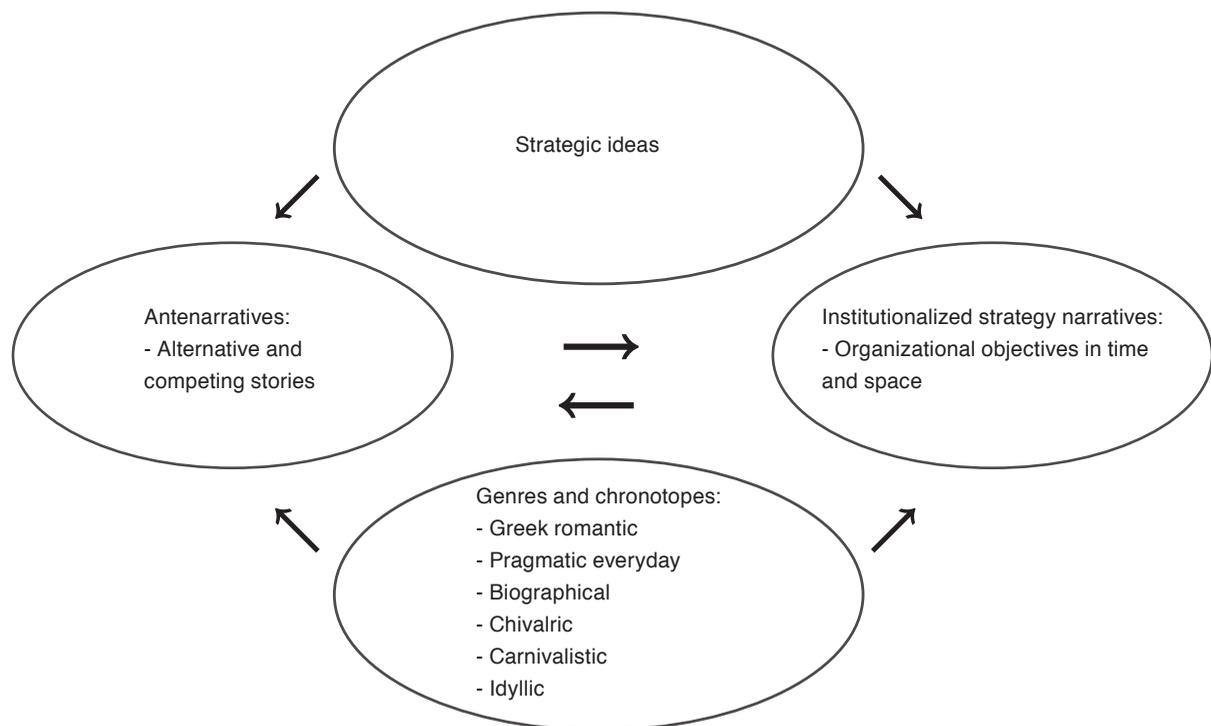
How do some constructions then become widely spread stories and even institutionalized strategy narratives whereas others do not? Boje's (2008, 2011) storytelling approach, greatly influenced by Bakhtin's ideas, provides an interesting conceptual basis to clarify this issue. He focuses attention on 'antenarratives' as essential means of organizational sensemaking. According to this view, '[A]ntenarratives are prospective (forward-looking) bets that an ante-story (before-story) can change organizational relationships' (Boje, 2008: 13). Antenarratives are fragments of discourse that are articulated to make sense of things or to give sense to them in chaotic organizational reality. This means that rather than focusing on traditional narrative analysis of relatively salient structures, plots and actants, one should zoom in on the fragmented pieces of discourse – antenarratives – that create specific kinds of meanings. Thus, antenarrative analysis allows one to focus on ongoing prospective sensemaking and sensegiving. Boje puts it as follows: 'Forward-looking antenarratives are the most abundant in business, yet the most-overlooked in research and consulting practice. These fragile antenarratives, like the butterfly, are sometimes able to change the future, to set changes and transformations in motion that have an impact on the big picture. More accurately, antenarratives seem to bring about a future that would not otherwise be.' (Boje, 2008: 13-14). The antenarrative perspective thus allows people to understand the complexity of emerging strategy narratives. These narratives can involve a bricolage of several types of narratives where the 'official' way of telling the story is only one part of the picture.

Importantly, organizational strategizing involves polyphony: multiple antenarratives that provide alternative and competing bases for an organization's strategy. In ongoing storytelling, some of these antenarratives then 'take on', that is, they make sense to others (Hardy et al., 2000). These antenarratives thus become 'living stories' (Boje, 2008) that are spread in organizational storytelling. They may also develop into institutionalized ways of making sense of and giving sense to strategy. Over time, they can even become important 'sediments' of organizational identity (Czarniawska, 2004). Although only some strategy narratives, particular constructions of objectives, gain such privileged status, there are usually alternatives to the 'official strategy narratives'. However, these competing versions may be expressed in the form of other, often unconventional, genres and chronotopes. That is, the official epic or romantic strategies are complemented and often challenged by tragic, comic, ironic, cynical or even carnivalistic tales. In Bakhtin's terms, this means 'dialogicality' – the fact that specific types of narratives tend to co-exist in particular ways (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Hazen 1993; Boje 2008). In this view, Bakhtin emphasizes that no matter how efficiently a narrative has smoothed a sequence of events by means of a plot that seems to fit neatly to the sequence of events and actions, there is always an opportunity for alternative interpretations (Bakhtin 1993). Moreover, time, being alive, is always open to the contingencies of the unpredictable and ever-changing world.

Thus, in addition to providing alternative and competing versions, the strategy narratives also complement each other in organizational strategizing. In this view, strategy work is the unfolding of many possible stories. An adventure

story, that builds on the Greek romance and 'the encounter' chronotope, provides the basis for a reconstruction of a new common future. Pragmatic everyday narratives that focus on the present are important to spell out how an imagined strategy links with one's own everyday work and actions. A biography type of description of strategy may serve to personify achievements and objectives and to glorify specific individuals such as current or past top managers. A chivalric strategy story can then provide an inspiring basis for the future, allowing for imaginative futures and ambitious ideas to be talked into being. A carnivalistic strategy – maybe resembling Rabelaisian novels – can serve to highlight collective efforts, but also for criticizing the official, top management centered visions. A family idyll type of strategy narrative can in turn feed nostalgic needs and be used to legitimate the status quo. And so on. The co-existence of strategy narratives is not inconsequential but different strategy narratives give voice to different actors and ideas. Strategic ideas do not emerge from the open air but are related to competing antenarratives. Some of these antenarratives may then develop into more institutionalized strategy narratives. We emphasize that all these narratives involve specific genres and chronotopes that construct the past, present and the future in particular ways. Furthermore, these strategy narratives are constructed in a particular time and space: some strategy narratives are useful to make sense of the present, while others are referring to past experiences or future expectations. Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical framework.

**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework: Constructions of strategy narratives in time and space



## **CONCLUSION**

Despite a general interest in storytelling in strategizing, there is a lack of understanding of how exactly strategy narratives construct the past, present, and future. Such analysis is important in and of itself but also because it helps to comprehend how specific constructions affect what is seen as relevant, important, legitimate or natural in organizational strategizing. For this purpose, we have outlined a Bakhtin-inspired view of strategy narratives. This view builds on an understanding of literary time, highlights the role of genres and chronotopes in strategy tales and underscores the process through which some antenarratives become widespread stories and even institutionalized parts of an organization's strategy.

The implications of this analysis help us to better understand some of the key questions that have remained poorly understood in strategy literature. In particular, through an analysis of chronotopes, we can better comprehend how strategizing as creative activity is both enabled and constrained by readily available forms, often in ways that we are not aware of. Furthermore, by analyzing how different types of antenarratives become living stories and finally institutionalized strategies, we can see how strategizing is based on dialogicality and polyphony. This often passes unnoticed in more conventional analysis.

This paper has sketched a Bakhtinian framework to better understand the narrative construction of strategies in organizations. However, many theoretical issues require further development. Future studies could for example go further in their analysis of specific genres and chronotopes and investigate how they relate to strategizing. For example, typical strategy stories often tend to promote the power position of specific individuals and glorify their actions. Future studies could dig deeper into such tendencies and their implications on strategizing. The Rabelaisian novel and carnivalesque stories can provide alternatives to dominant strategy narratives. By doing so, they promote collective, playful sensemaking and widespread organizational participation in strategy work. Everyday stories, with their focus on 'the road', can embrace the way strategy narratives happen in the present, in the everyday life and work of the organization. A closer analysis of such narratives and storytelling would thus be particularly fruitful. There is also much more that can be done to better understand how particular strategy antenarratives become institutionalized and what it is that happens to dialogicality in such processes.

More than anything else, there is a need for empirical work in this area. We hope that this framework can inspire empirical studies of strategy narratives. We also believe that it is only through careful case-specific analysis that we can really understand the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of strategy narratives, and discover how the past, present and future are constructed in strategic storytelling.

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