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Elements of Narrative Analysis

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Managing Big Cities



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Abstract

This article is intended to be an introduction to narrative analysis. It introduces key terms in narrative theory (e.g. story and plot), discusses various types of narratives relevant for social studies and features three selected analytical approaches to narratives: a poetic classification, a tripartite way of reading and a deconstructive analysis. The conclusion presents some reflections on narratives as ways to make sense of time. References have been selected as to guide the reader to further studies of narratives and narrative perspectives.

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Introduction

I have just started writing this article when I take a quick look at the latest internet edition of *The Financial Times*:

SUEZ BOOSTS DIVIDEND AHEAD OF GDF MERGER

By Lydia Adetunji

Published: March 9, 2006, 08:50, www.ft.com

Suez, the French utility, on Thursday reported better than expected results for the 2005 full year and raised its annual dividend by 25 per cent ahead of its planned merger with government-backed utility Gaz de France. Suez had already offered a 1 special dividend linked to the 73bn (\$87bn) GdF merger plan. On top of that, it announced a 15 per cent rise in the ordinary annual dividend in January. It has now bettered that with a 25 per cent increase to 1 per share.

The companies involved are, on the one hand, the private industrial service group Suez and, on the other hand, the French state-controlled (80%) natural gas supplier Gaz de France. Informed readers would immediately recognize an episode of a large ongoing business operation, that is, the proposed merger of these two French companies. Gaz de France and Suez recently made public the intent to create, in traditional corporate strategic terms, a European leader in energy and environmental services (Gaz de France and Suez, 2006). However, press commentators have chosen to point instead at the political dimension of the project as the planned merger can be seen both as a way of rapidly privatizing Gaz de France and a way to counter a possible hostile take over of Suez by Enel, the Italian producer and distributor of electricity (Bezaf, 2006). Concerning the latter, the Italian minister for economy and finance has said that the proposed merger operation is “a slap in the face of Italy by France” (Bozonnet, 2006). In any case, Enel has in the last few weeks raised approximately 50 billions to be in a position whence it at any time may launch an offensive on Suez (Weber, 2006). Is this a corporate strategy or a backbone reaction of economic patriotism? As often in the energy sector, it is probably meaningless to even try to disentangle what is a matter of capitalist restructuring and what is a matter of political concerns for national energy interests. I register the information, make a wish for European corporate life that the deal is not governed by greedy concerns by top management for their personal wealth, as was the case at Enron, and click myself back to my manuscript.

Most business practitioners, students or researchers would consider the Financial Times article above as a plain statement of fact. My contention in this article is that it can alternatively be viewed as an illustration both of the omnipresence of narratives in management, organisation or political life and of the narrative character of much of our sense-making and understanding. The FT.com-article can be viewed as part of an on-going narrative that started a few months ago and probably will last several more months, leading, in turn,

to a new narrative of, for example, the failed merger, the post-merger phase of the business deal, or something similar. Published in FT.com, this narrative is obviously told from a financial rather than, let's say, a social or ecological point of view. One can easily identify its settings and characters, even though it is not yet sure who will end up being the villain or who will be celebrated as the hero. One can also fit the episode that the article describes into a plot, that is, a causal chain of events, and compose a story of the business operation. The various motives given for the decisions that are taken, either by the actors themselves or by journalists, are in this regard very helpful, even though they may be partial, questionable or even contradictory, since they make it easier to link the different events of one story with another. At some point, a morale might even emerge from these games of money, power and patriotism. The article lets the decision by Suez to boost its dividends ahead of the Gaz de France merger contribute to our understanding of the corporate world, the energy sector and capitalism. And for the audience, it is simply to look forward, with some reasonable excitement, to the next episode of the story.

Narrative, story, plot and narration

Terminology in narrative theory is fluctuating. This reflects the fact that narrative theory gathers contributions from a vast array of academic traditions and languages, among which Russian and French organise meaning in such different ways that it is not always possible to agree on univocal translations. Under such circumstances, specifying how key terms relate to one another might be a way to, if not settle controversies, at least avoid misunderstandings and confusion. The focus in this section is on the terms narrative, story and plot.

VARIOUS DEFINITIONS

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* Porter Abbott (2002, p.12) defines narrative as “the representation of an event or a series of events”. Some might have insisted on the re-presentational activity involved, but he stresses that the key term of his definition is ‘event’, a term that he presents as a synonym for ‘action’: without at least one event you may have a description but you will not have a narrative. “My dog has fleas” is, for example, not a narrative in this case, but “My dog is bitten by a flea” is, as it tells of an event or action: the bite of the flea.

Abbott's single-event definition of a narrative is a bare minimum; say others who require that there must be at least two events, one after another, to form a narrative. For them, it is the depiction of sequenced events that is characteristic of a narrative. Paul Cobley (2003) states, for example, that at their simplest all narratives are the movement from a beginning point to a finish.

Seymour Chatman (1978) introduces an important distinction in narratology between the 'what' and the 'how'. The 'what' of the narrative she calls the story; it refers to the formal content element of the narrative, that is, the events, characters or settings. The 'how' of the narrative she calls the discourse; it refers to the formal expression element of narrative, for example, whether the narrative is rendered in a verbal, cinematic or other way, or whether it is told in direct or indirect style. Detailing the chrono-logic of narratives, Chatman (1990) defines discourse as the external movement through time of narratives (e.g. the time it takes to read a book or watch a film) and story as their internal movement through time (e.g. the time that elapses between the first and the last event that are described). The difference between narrative and non-narrative types of text is, according to her, that although both types involve a discourse in the sense that it takes time to render them, only narratives involve a story, that is, a content that runs through time.

Not all theorists, however, define 'story' as the events depicted and shown in a narrative. To Barbara Czarniawska (2004), a story is a narrative with a plot, that is, causal chains of actions and events that form a meaningful structure. A list of dates and events with some causal connections might constitute a narrative, for example, a chronicle. Yet, if a narrative is devoid of a plot, it is not a story. To become a story, a narrative has to be emplotted - provided with a plot. Thus, what Czarniawska finds of interest and importance in narrative analysis are the ways and techniques of emplotment. Also Yannis Gabriel (2000) is keen on maintaining a clear demarcation between narrative and story on the basis of the existence of a plot in the latter. However, he also insists on the poetic conditions of the delivery of stories. Rejoining Chatman's notion of narrative discourse, Gabriel asserts that to be a story, a narrative needs to be delivered in a manner that seeks to entertain, persuade and win over the audience – which is why he is more interested in storytelling than in stories. The ambiguity of the terminology can be somewhat alleviated by schematically noting that for Seymour Chatman [Narrative = Discourse + Story]; for Barbara Czarniawska [Story = Narrative + Plot]; and for Yannis Gabriel [Story = Narrative + Plot + Discourse].

Representing event(s), rendering the flow of time, being emplotted and following specific conditions of delivery is still too restrictive a view of narratives and stories, David Boje (2001) argues. Stories, particularly in organisational contexts, are not always told with the proper plot sequence and the mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory. He therefore coins a new term to depict stories that render the ongoing, the here and now, and collective sensemaking efforts aimed at rendering the flow of experience: antenarratives. With Boje's antenarratives, narrative theory comes very close to the more general notion of 'account'.

Defining narration, finally, is much easier. Narration refers to the action of telling a story or a part of a story, either orally or by some other means. It refers to the activity of the narrator. The narrator is sometimes equalled to the author,

but it might be judicious to establish a distinction between the one who is telling the story and who has authored it. A company's spokesperson is, for example, not always the author of the narrative or the story that is presented to the audience.

BACK TO THE PLANNED MERGER OF SUEZ AND GAZ DE FRANCE

Let me make these various definitions of narratives, discourse, story, plot and antenarrative more explicit by referring to the example featured in the introduction. The 'GdF is trying to merge with Suez'-article is a narrative in Abott's sense since it is a representation of an event or action. Most authors would, however, require at least two events and a few dates to speak of a narrative, for example: "Following the announcement by GdF of its plans to merge with Suez (February, 28), the latter has announced a raise of its annual dividend by 25 per cent (March, 9)".

Admittedly, one could object with Cobley that this narrative lacks an end and that it is only a narrative in the making. All the same, the discourse is, according to Chatman, the rendering of the narrative in the internet edition of the famous finance newspaper, whereas the story is the sequence of events involved (a square parenthesis [xxx] indicates that the event is not explicitly mentioned in the article): "[Enel plans to take over Suez] / Gaz de France announces its merger with Suez / [Italian minister of justice protests] / [Accusations made of French industrial nationalism] / Suez raises its dividend by 25% / [Enel raises enough money to launch operation of Suez]".

This story is however not a story in Czarniawska's terms as it lacks a structuring plot. Since we have not yet come to a closure, such a plot could be formulated as a cliff-hanger concerning private versus public ownership: "Will a raise in dividend by 25% be enough to convince the Suez shareholders who might oppose the merging of the company with state-controlled Gaz de France and thereby threaten the French government's plans to create a major French private energy company?".

Whether such a plot is enough to produce a story in Gabriel's sense is debatable. I personally find these business manoeuvres politically important, and so do the trade-unions at Gaz de France, which definitely have found them worthy of attention. Nevertheless, I can admit that the narrative lacks poetic qualities, at least when it comes to the rendering, the pink colour of the newspaper notwithstanding. In this regard, it might be interesting from a social science point of view to look for Boje's antenarratives and compare how people involved in the deal, for example employees on the shop-floor or in the trading room, make sense of, and experience, the process.

“The narratives of the world are numberless”

The sentence that headlines this section is taken from Roland Barthes’ opening of his now classic structural analysis of narratives (1966/1977, p. 7). It announces that the focus here is on providing examples of which sorts of narratives can be relevant to social sciences studies.

FICTION NARRATIVES

Many narratives are explicitly fictitious, for example novels, plays or films, but also cartoons, tales, fables, jokes or paintings (at least some). However, their depicting of invented settings, objects, characters and events does not reduce their relevance for social science studies. Fictitious narratives do not only contribute decisively to the forming and developing of our narrative competence, from early childhood and throughout life; they also keep informing our ways of understanding and making sense of the flows of events that surround us. Fictitious narratives also provide us with the opportunity of broadening our experiential register by letting us enter unique situations, and, more importantly, often in a privileged manner, for example through the eyes of or along with one of the main protagonists. Emile Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (English title: *The Ladies’ Paradise*) provides a back stage access to the birth of a modern warehouse, whereas Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* presents a fascinating portrait of professional dedication, authoritarian leadership and an antagonistic man-to-nature relationship.

A narrative does not need to be faithful to historical or social reality in order to contribute to our sense-making, either to strengthen or to undermine it (although Zola proceeded with the precision of a scientist to come as close as possible to what he deemed to be natural truth). As Czarniawka-Joerges and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1994, p. 13) observe, works of fiction, for example novels or plays, are unique in their capacity “to grasp the complex without simplifying it, to render the paradox without resolving it in a dialectic tale”. One of the reasons why Sophocles’ *Antigone* has fascinated audiences for almost 2400 years is that the play stages, in a forever equivocal manner, the difficulties of Creon to conciliate blood fidelity with official imperatives (Marini, 1992). Likewise, a reason why so many laugh at Scott Adams’ cartoon *Dilbert* (e.g. Adams, 1997) is that it efficiently helps the audience pinpoint (and maybe in some cathartic way support) some of the absurd characteristics of management and office life. Narrative value is independent of truth value.

NARRATIVES IN NON-FICTION

Narrative analysis is however not only relevant for the study of fictitious texts as even non-fictitious texts can be read in narrative terms. The FT.com-article featured in the introduction is an example of how news can be considered to be emplotted. Similarly, memoirs and biographies can be considered emplotted in

the sense that they are organised around the life and achievements of one or a few characters, either to glorify or vilify Accounting's commitment to a true and fair view notwithstanding, corporate annual reports too can be considered as narratives. Their much standardised structure resembles the narrative structure of soap operas in the sense that both depict parallel plots, either in contact with each other or not, that all move at the same pace of instalment, and can be regarded as corporate administrative serials (Corvellec, 1997). News, life accounts or corporate performance reports are just as filled with settings, characters and plots as novels, plays or other fictional narratives – the difference between the fiction and non-fiction being one of degree rather than of nature.

Some narratives, finally, are hard to position with precision on a fiction – non-fiction continuum, for example, teaching cases, gossips and rumours, observations and interviews, or business plans and advertisements. Teaching cases are educational narratives, either fictitious or fieldwork-based ones that are designed to fit targeted educational purposes. That cases are so frequently used in disciplines as varied as medicine, law, psychology or management is a clear indication of the pedagogical potential in story-telling and discussions about narratives.

Gossips and rumours are also narratives. The difficulty to either verify or falsify them is the nerve of their unique communicative efficiency. This also serves to illustrate that the value of a narrative in terms of knowledge cannot be reduced to its truth value. Because gossips and rumours do interest people, they provide indications of which matters are of concern to organisational members, for example, ongoing power struggles. Approached as alternative corporate narratives, gossips and rumours open up for understanding organisational culture that goes beyond the flashy presentations made in official communications and allow us a peek at the ambiguous diversity of the elusive ways organisational members make sense of organisational life.

Observations or interviews are likewise supposed to shed light on the reality of the field, but they are by design personal accounts. Czarniawska (2004, cha 4) shows at some length that interviews are interactions and narrative production sites since answers in an interview are often spontaneously formed into narratives such as life stories or historical descriptions. Unless one exclusively subscribes to the correspondence theory of truth, interviews are more revealing of how the interviewer and the interviewee emplot questions and answers than for what they might tell about some truth 'out-there'.

Business plans, for their part, often balance their wishful thinking and grandiloquence on the edge between optimistic realism and unintentional fiction. I could not, for example, position on a fiction – non-fiction continuum the joint press release of Suez and Gaz de France announcing the creation of "A European champion, world player in energy and environment" or declaring that "The new group will benefit from an unrivalled position in terms of complementarities of skills, employee talent and quality of assets" (Gaz de France and Suez 2006). The

same ambivalent mix of truth and fiction can be observed in many advertisements; prosaic campaigns for products or companies use means of expression that clearly belong to narrative fiction, from special effects to explicit references to well-known fictions – an ambiguous play that Adbusters (2006) adroitly exploits when they parody selected advertisement campaigns to produce critical political counter-narratives.

To conclude, there are countless narratives and there are also more fruitful questions to ask about them than whether they are true or not. One can ask what a narrative says, whether and how it is kept together, what it does to us (particularly in terms of questioning and learning), what the intention(s) behind its being produced were, and how and why it has become successful (if, of course, this is the case) just there or just then. Narratives are always true, not because they tell something true, but in the sense that it is true that they tell what they tell. Narratives are also within easy reach. They are also seldom further than a few clicks, a library query or a few questions away. Dive into (y)our literary, theatrical, artistic, cinematographic or folkloric heritage. Visit their organisational habitats: offices, production floors, websites, pressrooms, lunch places and pub annexes. Either effort will rapidly provide you with enough narrative material to train and develop your analytical capacity and ability to make sense of social life.

Narrative analysis

Once collected, narratives have to be analysed, these two activities being integrated even depending on each other. The purpose of this section is to illustrate, on the basis of the selected analytical perspectives, how variously narratives can be approached.

A POETIC APPROACH

Gabriel (2000, cha 3) recommends a poetic approach to narratives. One may be critical of classifications and typologies (Gabriel actually is). There is nevertheless a point to sort organisational narratives into epic, romantic, comic and tragic modes as this enables a systematic unfolding of their characteristics. As a reminder, the epic mode generates pride in the narrator and is meant to rouse the admiration of the listener. The romantic mode is of a lighter, sentimental, quality and addresses the audience's interest for love, appreciation and affection. The comic mode intends to amuse the audience, make it laugh, whereas the tragic mode generates pity and sorrow and invites the audience to feel respect and compassion.

Gabriel bases his classification of narratives on four main criteria: a) traits of the main protagonist and other protagonists, b) plot focus, c) major poetic tropes in use, and d) main emotions at work. The main protagonist in the epic mode is

a hero; an object of love in the romantic mode; and a victim in both the comic and the tragic modes, yet a deserving one in the former and a non-deserving one in the latter. Correspondingly, the plot is focussed on achievement, noble victory and success in the epic mode; on love in the romantic mode; it deals with misfortune as deserved chastisement in the comic mode; and it deals with undeserved misfortune and trauma in the tragic mode. These characteristic plots rely in turn on specific poetic tropes: an alternating of success and failure in the epic mode, the conversion of the victim's misfortune into a deserved punishment for failure of character or past transgression in the comic mode, and the attribution of blame to a supernatural principle such as fate or a malevolent agent in the tragic mode. Major epic emotions are pride, admiration and nostalgia; romantic emotions are love, care kindness, generosity and gratitude; comic emotions are mirth, aggression and scorn; and tragic emotions are sorrow, pity, anger and pathos.

Classifications and typologies are effective analytical devices. The point with Gabriel's (2000) approach is to support a systematic poetic analysis of the stories that one has gathered. This can be illustrated by a poetic reading of the FT.com-article 'Suez Boosts Dividend Ahead of Gdf Merger' reprinted above. A series of surmounted difficulties crowned with a positive end will produce a merger epic, whereas a negative end will either make way for a business comedy, if Suez is considered to deserve its fate or a business tragedy if it does not. Considering the merger as a marriage is definitely approaching the deal as belonging to the romantic mode.

Whether one is to look for a hero, a lover or a victim thus depends upon how the operation ends, that is, who takes over whom. It also depends upon from whose perspective; that of Suez, Gaz de France, Enel or somebody else's. Some might find the manoeuvres of the French government heroically efficient. Supporters of Suez could instead, in this article, recognise an episode of a romance about how the beloved object adroitly responds to the desire of its owners and of the market. Others will find the whole story amusingly old-fashioned and consider the Suez payment of an increased dividend as yet another expression of nationalist exaggeration. And, finally, some may consider the same raise in dividend as yet another tragic example of the current subservience of industry to financial interests and consider the core activities at Suez as potentially threatened by short term capitalist interest. Depending upon how one chooses to classify the article/story, one will insist on some epic, romantic comic or tragic twist of the plot.

This will, likewise, lead to an insistence on some emotion or other. Different understandings of the story will prompt different emotions. An epic understanding will prompt admiration for some or other character, for example for Enel as a daring challenger. A romantic understanding might generate esteem or thankfulness, for example for the French government's efforts at building a large national energy company. A comic understanding might generate mocking

scorn for managers who are fond of buying companies but not keen on their companies being bought. And a tragic understanding might awaken anger and a will to seek revenge among stakeholders or employees. The emotions that a narrative stirs up depend upon how one understands this narrative.

Narrative interpretation is as varied as any other interpretation. The strength of the typology put together by Gabriel is to provide clear and helpful guidelines for a systematic and structured narrative analysis of texts.

A TRIPARTITE WAY OF READING

Rather than classifying stories, Czarniawska (2004, cha 5) prefers to classify ways of reading. Adapting a typology originally set up by Hernadi (1987), she suggests distinguishing between explication, explanation and exploration – a tripartite continuum within which the reader is getting more and more active, going from mere receiver of textual wisdom to co-author of the text and even author of a text of his/her own.

Explication is guided by an ambition to simply understand the text. The main question of explication is ‘what does the text say?’ and although it may seem to be a question that is easy to answer, it often is not. Stories from the field are rarely complete and unequivocally authorised but fragmented, open-ended, controversial and multi-voiced. Moreover, it might be difficult for an outsider to recompose and understand the social conditions of production, diffusion and consumption of narratives. Rendering the content of the text, under such circumstances, might therefore involve more authorial presence – for example in terms of selecting, framing or voicing – than a naïve understanding of explication would admit. Explication can however be an effective preparation to both explanation and exploration.

The main question of explanation is ‘how does the text say what it says?’ and there are many ways to answer it. Some may try to deduce the intention of the author, a tradition of reading with origins in the interpretation of sacred texts. Others may prefer to focus the reader’s experience of the text and question how the text supports a coming into being of meaning so as to unfold how it leads to understanding. To put it briefly, whereas the former are focussed on reading the text, the latter are more attracted toward reading the process of the text being read. Among other things, Czarniawska invites us to take into consideration the differences that exist between an oral and a written text when it comes to the duration of meaning availability, the degree of objectification, the presence or absence of a concrete audience and other social variables playing a role at the moment of delivery and interpretation.

Exploration, finally, is more of an existential enactment of the text. Readers bring their lives and preoccupations into the text as if they were standing in for the author, becoming authors. The main questions of exploration are ‘what does the text do with us?’ and ‘what do I do with this text?’ And to those who

would believe that this is a way of reading that has nothing to do with social sciences, Czarniawska (2004, p.71) answers that exploration is the meaning of the practice of social science: “The social science reader reads in order to become an author: no matter what school of explication or explanation he or she belongs to, no matter whether the reading turns out to be methodological or inspired in kind.”

The ‘Suez Boosts Dividend Ahead of Gdf Merger’ – article is an illustration of the difficulties of explication. Besides the fact that it may be hard to understand due to its being formulated in technical language and that it presupposes detailed knowledge of the previous episodes of the story, it is not obvious to grasp how the raise in dividend with 15 per cent relates to the merger plan. One needs, as a reader, to master the rules of corporate valuation, be aware of financial markets psychology and maybe even have access to financial analysts or insiders at Suez to render the content of the offer fully explicit. (According to an analyst that I have consulted, the technical crux is that paying additional dividends is a way for Suez to get rid of some of its cash and thus reduce its market value as a company so as to force Enel either to lower its bid, which might displease shareholders at Suez, or to keep its offer at the same level and thereby pay as much money for a company that is worth less, which makes the deal more expensive for the Italian company.)

Explanation generates yet other difficulties. The status of the article is ambiguous. The text is presented in written form but posted such a short time on the world-wide-web that it is nearly as short-lived as an oral message. Moreover, the text is deliberately kept short, but is obviously part of a longer story that is kept implicit rather than made explicit. It is, finally, formulated in a financial jargon with the aim to provide an impression of cold factual objectivity while being filled with ambiguity and uncertainty discernible for example in the valuating expressions “better than expected” or “government-backed” that are used in the text. The FT.com article balances therefore on several edges simultaneously: the edge between writing and orality, between stand-alone piece and episode, and between rendering and producing facts. This may explain why it is less easy to understand than it seems.

Speaking of exploration, finally, the FT.com text helps me develop a critical political position toward financial capitalism. I can also use it as a recurrent pedagogical device in my own text. Others may, of course, make different use of it. Because of it, some may sell their shares in Suez, others might purchase some. Journalists may launch an investigation, whereas civil servants working with competition matters at the European Commission might make a mental note of it. There are many ways to act upon a text.

From Czarniawska’s description of explication, explanation and exploration I would like to retain the idea of various ways of reading. Her description is an injunction to reflect upon reading as an activity and an invitation to be critically aware of our active role as readers.

A DECONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

Criticism is also a recurrent theme in the no less than eight ways to analyse antenarratives (see above) that Boje (2001) describes. Going through each of these would be not only tedious, it would hardly be possible to render the many nuances introduced by the author and I will therefore limit my ambition to a cursory rendering of the first one: deconstruction analysis. The starting point of Boje's deconstruction analysis is that which every story excludes. Correspondingly, he suggests in his own brand of Jacques Derrida's philosophy a stepwise analytical procedure aimed at decentring the micro mechanisms of power that regulate this exclusion:

- i) List any occurrence of a dichotomy or bipolar terms that are used in the story
- ii) Reinterpret the hierarchy in place in the story
- iii) Make rebel voices heard: What voices are not being expressed in this story? Which voices are subordinated to other voices?
- iv) Stress the other side of the story and show that each centre is in a constant state of change and disintegration
- v) Deny the plot and move it around
- vi) Find the exceptions and state them in a way that makes them extreme or absurd
- vii) Trace what is between the lines, not said; fill in the blanks
- viii) Resituate the story beyond its dualisms, excluded voices or singular viewpoint

The idea is to re-author the story so that the hierarchy is resituated and a new balance of views is attained, to re-story in order to remove the dualities and margins. Boje's (2001) deconstruction analysis supposes an active participation of the reader that reminds of Czarniawska's (2004) exploration, but in a way that is more focussed on criticism.

Processing the FT.com-article through Boje's procedure for deconstruction analysis provides yet a new understanding of how this short text functions as a narrative. (Numbers i) to viii) refer to the description of the procedure above.)

- i) Several dualities are to be found in the article, for example: expected vs. actual results; better vs. lesser than expected results; ahead vs. after its planned merger; special vs. ordinary annual dividend; or already vs. now.
- ii) Each of these dualities provides, in turn, indications about the value system endorsed in the text. The 'expected vs. lesser than expected results' dichotomy, for example, both assumes and strengthens the legitimacy of the claim made by financial analysts to determine what is a normal level of economic return for a company; it is thereby an affirmation of the primacy of the

financial logic of capitalism over its industrial or social logics. The ‘ahead vs. after its planned merger’ dichotomy is, likewise, an expression of the preference of financial press for pro-active and preventive managerial actions before reactive ones; it expresses the liking by the financial community of companies that are managed according to the managerial ideal of rational planning and control. The ‘special vs. ordinary dividend’ dichotomy, finally, enacts the idea that shareholders have the right not only to a regular share of the company’s added value but even to an additional reward whenever exceptional events involve something unforeseeable – a right that is, as I will soon show, not granted to all stakeholders alike; in this respect, the article expresses a preference for stockholder before stakeholder theory of the firm. Support of financial capitalism, rational management and stockholder rights may be provided *en passant* but still be very effectively conveyed.

- iii) The article gives no voice to unions or, for that matter, the Italian Enel. Admittedly, the article is very short and therefore selective. Should such a silencing practice continue from article to article, however, it would give a clear indication about the author or the journal’s political bias.
- iv) How dichotomies and silencing strategies implicitly enact a very specific system of political values can be made explicit by observing one’s own (sometimes amused) surprise at the result of substituting some of the terms. Substitute in the original article, for example, ‘employee bonuses’ for ‘dividend’ and ‘worked week’ for ‘share’ and see what happens:

SUEZ BOOSTS EMPLOYEE BONUSSES AHEAD OF GDF MERGER

By H. Le Corvellec

Imagined: March 16, 2006, 15:03

Suez, the French utility, on Thursday reported better than expected results for the 2005 full year and raised employee bonuses by 25 per cent ahead of its planned merger with government-backed utility Gaz de France. Suez had already offered a 1 special bonus per worked week linked to the 73bn (\$87bn) GdF merger plan. On top of that, it announced a 15 per cent rise in the ordinary employee bonus in January. It has now bettered that with a 25 per cent increase to 1 per worked week.

The substitution produces a new story that, because of its oddity – Why increase personal bonuses to counter a hostile bid? – opens up for a critical denial of the original plot.

- v) Replacing ‘dividend’ with ‘employee bonuses’ and ‘share’ with ‘worked week’ creates a plot deviance that unfolds the taken-

for-granted character of the original plot, and thus of the corresponding social, economic and political worldview assumed in the original FT.com-article. For example, in this worldview, developing shareholder loyalty with economic reward is featured as an understandable managerial move, whereas doing the same for employees appears as an oddity. (Observe, however, that if a company's main resource is its personnel, as so often is claimed, such a strategy might make good managerial sense.) One could even claim that in this worldview, it is considered normal that employees be 'sold and bought' together with the firm they work for, even without their consent. The denial of the original plot obtained by my double substitution of 'employee bonuses' for 'dividend' and 'worked week' for 'share' is a critical move that forces the article reader to confront and question its untold assumptions on how to rank the claims of employees and stockholders. Other substitutions would create other plot denials. A replacement of agency that would take initiative away from companies' top management and instead feature a market fatalism worldview would, for example, enable a questioning of the taken-for-granted view on managerial agency in the original article. Plot denial is a way to unsettle the original plot from its grounds.

- vi) Creating deviance, for example through term substitution, is an alternative to looking for existing exceptions or absurdities. In a longer text one could look for traits that are in rupture with the rest of the story. As an alternative, one could try to gather field stories that stand in contrast to the stories one has gathered already, for example, through marginalised employees or employees who have left the organisation, voluntarily or not. Jokes, word games or cartoons posted on office doors are in this regard valuable narrative sources.
- vii) Tracing the unsaid of a story and filling in the blanks is probably the most arbitrary, or the most difficult in deconstruction analysis. At the risk of being unfair, one could observe that the FT.com-article exclusively adopts a stockholder perspective and is silent about how other stakeholders might be affected. It does not say anything of whether this extra payment of dividend is beneficiary to the company or simply a way for top management to enrich shareholders, themselves among others if they own shares or options. It does not say anything either of the effect that this extra-dividend decision might have. The decision is objectified, a-socialised and naturalised. It is turned into an objective decisional black-box with a right to exist in itself to which we are not given access. For want of access to the inside of the black-box, however, we can at least notice and question its existence.

- viii) The 'Suez Boosts Dividend Ahead of Gdf Merger'- article is thus far from a neutral rendering of a managerial decision among many in a major business operation. Because it provides some information and not some other, and because it does it just the way it does it, the article participates actively in the production and diffusion of an ideological discourse, for example, in favour of financial capitalism and openly supports related value hierarchies and political options. Deconstruction analysis is a procedure of re-storying, not in the sense of changing the facts that are rendered, but in the sense of dis- and re-embedding what is said and how it is said, in order to make way for a social criticism of untold assumptions and that which is kept silent.

Gabriel's poetic classification, Czarniawska's typology of reading and Boje's deconstructive analysis are only a few examples of the many ways one can study narratives. Many other theoretical perspectives and other methodological approaches, for example, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly's *Narrative Enquiry* (2000) which is a method to understand experience as lived and told stories, would have deserved to be presented here, but, unfortunately, the limited space of this article does not allow it.

Conclusion: Making sense of time

The pioneering works of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1986), Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Walter Fisher (1987) in philosophy, D.N. McCloskey (1986) in economics, Jerome Bruner (1986) in cognitive psychology, Clifford Geertz (1988) in anthropology as well as the trans-disciplinary efforts of Donald Polkinghorne (1987) have borne fruit. The narrative approach is now an established and distinctive theoretical and methodological approach in the social sciences. Narratives even serve as sources of practical inspiration, for example, to influence people (Simmons, 2001) or let them better cope with the complexity of organizational tasks (Allan et al., 2002). The narrative turn that the social sciences took in the nineteen eighties has two decades later become a practical, theoretical and methodological momentum to count with.

There are many reasons behind the success of narrative as a practical, theoretical or methodological source of inspiration, but I would like, in the guise of a conclusion, to emphasize a key idea that runs through narrative theory (and this article), namely that narratives contribute in a decisive manner to our making sense of time.

Our narrative competence is of considerable help when it comes to making sense of that which human beings experience as aging and clocks register in a mechanical way, that is, time. Narratives help us take measure of how much

time there is between two events or points in time. Narrative time helps us, in other words, understand bodily or mechanical time. A narrative such as 'Hervé inadvertently drops a glass that falls and crashes to the floor' is an evocative description of how much time elapses in a second or two, just like Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is an evocative description of how much time elapses in a year. One of the strong points of narratives is their ability to tell how long things take and, thereby, to tell time, for example: 'the time it takes for the day to once again become night' or 'the time it takes a child to become an adult'. Narratives structure our subjective experience of time. They thereby condition our sense and understanding of time (Abott, 2002).

By conditioning our sense and understanding of time, narratives also condition our subjective experience of existence. Narration, Hanna Arendt (1958/1983) claims, is not only the condition of meaning-production; it is also that which makes action the characteristic feature of the human condition. She illustrates this metaphysical supplement brought along with narration by contrasting *zôé*, or life as mere biological expression, with *bios*, or life as biography told in narration. Our understanding of life, our life as well as others' lives, as *bios* rather than *zôé*, is depending upon this life or these lives being narrated for (or may be by) us. This is why unfolding the silencing strategies enacted in and by narratives are so crucial. Those individuals or groups that have fought for being narrated so as to escape the nothingness of silence – slaves, workers or transsexuals, to name just a few but symbolic examples – are living proofs of the political relevance of critical narrative analysis, for example, deconstruction. Narration (or for that matter reading) is a question of *bios* or death. Under such circumstances, who would dare to claim that narratives are not serious matters?

I write these final lines on March 18, at 9.35. Would you agree if claimed that I have just told you a narrative about narrative analysis? By the way, while I was writing: Enel has pondered how to grab its runaway French bride (Betts, 2006) and Gaz de France has doubled its GdF-Suez synergy forecasts (Pogam, 2006); at least this is a *To be continued* story.

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