



A Dialectic Perspective on the Organization Theatre Metaphor

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Abstract

Organization studies uses "theater" as a metaphor for organization life in two ways: first as organizing-is-like-theatre, a perspective adopted by those who subscribe to a Goffman approach to organization dramaturgy; and second as the more literal organizing-is-theatre, a perspective adopted by those who subscribe to a Burkean approach. Our contribution is to explore a third, more dialectic view: theatre is both life and metaphor. We develop this dialectic view by contrasting the theatrical opposition between Debord's Society of Spectacle and Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" resistance. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed also presents a dialectic view, looking at how theatre can be used to empower spectators to become spect-actors. Our implication is the possibility of critical consciousness and praxis transforming formal spectacle through experiments in emancipatory carnival-like theatre.

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The field of organization studies uses "theatre" as a metaphor for organization life in two particular ways: first, "organizing-is-like-theatre," and second, the more literal "organizing-is-theatre." Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant's (2001) special journal issue, *Dramatizing and Organizing: Acting and Being* provides the interested reader with a good historical overview and collection of articles applying theatre to organizations. The first perspective, "organizing-is-like-theatre," developed out of the tradition of sociology and is most notable in the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1974). It draws on the theatrical metaphor as a means of studying and illustrating social processes in which "organizational members are essentially human actors, engaging in various roles and other official and unofficial performances" (Morgan, 1980, pp. 615-616). Those performances involve both actors and audience in a common definition and collaborative maintenance of the situation (Goffman, 1959). The second perspective comes from the tradition of philosophy and literary criticism and is represented by Kenneth Burke (1937, 1945, 1972). He contends that social action *literally* is dramatic and theatrical, thus, "organizing-is-theatre." The objective of this essay is to contrast the organizing-is-like-theatre with the organizing-is-theatre perspectives, and then explore a dialectic integration with several "critical postmodern" approaches to theatre. We see this critical postmodern integration in the writings of Guy Debord (1967) on "spectacle," Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) on "carnavalesque," and Augusto Boal (1972, 1992, 1995) on *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Our comparison of the dramaturgy of organization activities will highlight several ironies in our comparison of "organizing-is-like-theatre" and "organizing-is-theatre." First, while Goffman is known as the father of sociological dramaturgy, we believe that Burke is more sociological because of his focus on the drama of

everyday life and its link to social and political processes. Students of Kenneth Burke often reject Erving Goffman's approach to theatre as too metaphoric (Gusfield, [1989](#)) because he "uses drama as a metaphor for human interaction," (Kärreman, 2001, p. 91). However, Burke assumes humans create and live theatre for spectators, i.e., he "*literally* means that social action is necessarily dramatic" (Kärreman, [2001](#), p. 106) [ii](#).

Second, while both Goffman and Burke are known for their development of dramaturgical "frame analysis," for example, Burke's notion of the "pentad" (agency, act, scene, purpose, and agent), Goffman is criticized for engaging in "sociological reductionism" and for not being "particularly dramaturgical at all" (Kärreman, [2001](#), pp. 96, 107).

Because this journal's special issue is about metaphors, we want to make this distinction, and our position, clear. "Organizing-is-like-theatre" is concerned with the impact of metaphors as worldviews (Burrell & Morgan, [1979](#)) or ways of perceiving (framing) the world: "communities of theorists subscribing to relatively coherent perspectives . . . a foundation for inquiry" (Morgan, [1980](#), p. 607). As such, a metaphor is a mode of thought or an explanatory device aiding "conceptual clarification, comprehension, or insight" (Pepper, [1982](#), p. 197). Metaphors are also used as devices for critique and redescription (Boje, [1995](#); Hatch, [1999](#); Palmer & Dunford, [1996](#); Schön, [1993](#)). For example, Morgan's ([1986](#)) work in organization theory uses metaphors as diagnostic tools to gain insights into organizational practice and to create different practices based on new metaphors. In the "organizing-is-like-theatre" perspective of Goffman, we have the obvious use of a metaphor as an explanatory device. "Organizing-as-theatre" focuses on language use and the speech acts, in which metaphors are seen as discursive or linguistic practices shaping meaning (Cunliffe, [2001](#)). In the "organizing-is-theatre" perspective of Burke, we have not a metaphor, but a literal translation of organization life into drama. There is a purposeful denial by Burke of any degree of difference between the subject of theatre and organization life.

Our main contribution, however, is not simply to compare Goffman's and Burke's position on theatre and organizations -- we wish to avoid becoming polemic -- rather, it is to set the two opposed perspectives into a more dynamic relationship. In doing so, we combine the theatrical perspectives of both Goffman and Burke into a "critical postmodern" perspective through the work of Guy Debord's ([1967](#)) *Society of the Spectacle*, Augusto Boal's ([1974](#)) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and Bakhtin's ([1984](#)) writing on "carnavalesque." Bakhtin, Boal, and Debord make important contributions to a theatrical analysis of organizational life that we hope takes us beyond the debate of Goffman versus Burke in organization studies. We begin by providing an overview of Goffman's and Burke's perspectives. We then contribute a dialectic perspective on theatre and organization studies.

First Perspective: Organizational Theatre as Metaphor

Dramaturgical concepts such as the frame of theatre, scripting, and keying are theatrical concepts imported from Goffman ([1974](#)) to study the dramaturgical aspects of organizing and organizations. His approach fits neatly with Mintzberg's ([1973](#)) managerial roles and more recent studies of charismatic leadership behavior as dramaturgic (Gardner & Alvolio, [1998](#); Harvey, [2001](#)), emotional improvisation (Morgan & Krone, [2001](#)) where the leader is the spokesperson and dramatist of organizational life. Work by Czarniawska-Joerges ([1997](#)), Mangham ([1990](#)), Mangham and Overington ([1987](#)), and Rosen ([1985](#), [1987](#)) also seeks to apply tools and devices from theatre to organizational realities and the dramaturgical perspective has become quite central to charismatic leadership studies (Conger, [1991](#); Gardner & Alvolio, [1998](#); Harvey, [2001](#); Howell & Frost, [1989](#); Jones & Pittman, [1982](#)). Gardner and Alvolio ([1998](#)) for example, draw on the dramaturgical perspective to suggest charismatic leadership is a combination of Goffman's impression management process enacted theatrically in acts of *framing*, *scripting*, *staging*, and *performing*. However, "Goffman's dramaturgical perspective locates performances in the foreground and puts much more emphasis on this than other potential aspects of drama" such as image management and giving a performance persuasive to spectators (Kärreman, [2001](#), p. 91). Leaders cast themselves into charismatic roles and their followers are cast as allies in pursuit of the charismatic leader's vision. Harvey ([2001](#)) addresses this aspect by applying Gardner and Alvolio's ([1998](#)) dramaturgical perspective in a study of Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs uses exemplification (embodying the ideal of being morally responsible, committed

to the cause, and taking risks) and self-promotion (and less often organization-promotion) to enact his characterization of charismatic leadership (Gardner & Alvolio, 1998, p. 257).

Within organization studies, there is a growing body of research taking seriously the view of organization-is-like-theatre (Mangham, 1990; Clark & Mangham, 2001; Meisiek, 2002; Meisiek & Boje, 2001; Schreyogg, 2001). Professional actors (consultants, managers, O.D. and Human Resource people) stage tailor-made plays with professionally written scripts (O.D. interventions, events, training, ceremonies, meetings) for a specific organization. Audiences (workers and managers) are mostly passive spectators to the contracted dramatization. For example, Clark and Mangham (2001) explore the play *Your Life, Your Bank* commissioned by a bank's senior managers. The theme and plot are conceived and promoted by senior managers; consultants script scenes based upon briefings from senior managers; minor roles are acted by trusted middle managers (p. 19) and rehearsals further modify the performance. They, and other authors (e.g., Schreyogg, 2001), see such corporate-sponsored theatre as technology, rather than metaphor, because theatre is deployed as a management tool; a performance involving actors, directors, set designers, lighting specialists, musicians, and dramatists used to "promote problem-awareness and to stimulate a readiness to change" (Meisiek, 2002, p. 4).

A number of dramaturgical projects focus on various modes of presentation in small groups. "Group members look to others for cues about their identity and status. For example, gangs, cliques, clubs, and other voluntary organizations have the dual function of providing identity and status to members" (Harrington & Fine, 2000, pp. 312-323), such as Somerset, Weiss, Fahey and Mears's (2001) study of meetings in the pharmaceutical industry.

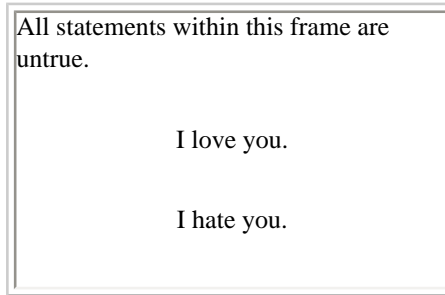
Several studies have applied dramaturgy to emotional improvisation (Morgan & Krone, 2001; Zurcher, 1982). Morgan and Krone's (2001) ethnographic study analyzed the processes and outcomes of emotional improvisation observed among nurses, technicians, and physicians in a cardiac care center. "Emotional improvisation, in this sense, refers to how technicians, nurses, and physicians perform along and against organizational constraints to alter emotion rules (such as "detached concern") as they construct individual and collective role identities" (Morgan & Krone, 2001, pp. 318-319). Maintaining a "professional" appearance in care-giving largely constrains actors to perform along their scripted roles (Morgan & Krone, 2001, p. 317).

Goffman's Approach to Framing

Goffman's (1974) theatrical focus emphasizes the differences between play and actual performance in ways that extended his earlier works on forms of impression management (1959). For Goffman, organizations are not entirely theatrical, though at a business meeting, training seminar, or conference the scene can turn dramatic. In *Frame Analysis* (1974), he develops conceptual terminology for the study of organizational performances. As mentioned above, key terms include scripting, frameworks, and keying. However, Mangham (1988, p. 57) and Kärreman (2001, p. 107) suggest Goffman's perspective is not that dramaturgical because he focuses on well scripted, pre-rehearsed performances rather than momentary and creative drama.

Goffman's use of frame draws on Bateson's (1955) exploration of whether a performance is play or the real thing. For example, Goffman (1974) noted that "it is in Bateson's (1955) paper that the term 'frame' was proposed in roughly the sense in which I want to employ it" (p. 7). The central metaphor-question revolves around what is a play and what is real. Goffman (1974) says real performance is when actors have "taken more than usual care and employed more than usual design and continuity in the presentation of what is ostensibly not a performance at all" (p. 127). A paradox emerges because a "real" performance is "acting" so well that it is not seen as a performance but as reality. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* Bateson (1972) bases his idea of frame on Epimenides' Paradox (596 B.C.). Epimenides was a Cretan who is attributed to have said, "All Cretans are liars . . . One of their own poets has said so." [1]

Figure 1: Epimenides' Paradox.



Source : Bateson, [1972](#), p. 184.

Bateson (1972) uses the paradox in Figure 1 to look at the process of framing, how for example the play frame "implies a special combination of primary and secondary processes . . . In primary process, map and territory are equated; in secondary process, they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated" (p. 185). In other words, if acting is real and reality is good acting, then we are never sure what is real or what is a play. As an audience member at an organizational performance, how can I be sure of the authenticity of the performance?

We contend that theatre-as-metaphor, as a management or socialization tool, is a means of social control and motivation by voyeurism, rather than participation, because it is meant to motivate and persuade corporate audiences to change their day-to-day performance. It is theatre-as-technology, owned and managed for managerialist instruction and intervention -- as value creating (Schreyogg, [2001](#)), but, we ask, value creating for whom? It is important to critique the technology of theater, not only in terms of how it controls and who benefits, but why it is happening? We begin this critique by contrasting how Goffman and Burke approach the concept of Frames. We will argue that Goffman's approach to Frame extends from the psychological to the sociological, and Burke's does the reverse. In the third section we look at the in-between or dialectics.

Second Perspective: Organization Life *is* Theatre

Theatre for Burke is not a metaphor used in some areas of organizational or social life; human action is dramatic (Gusfield, [1989](#); p. 36; Kärreman, [2001](#), p. 106). As Maital ([1999](#)) puts it, "organizing is not **like** theatre -- it **is** theatre" (as cited in Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, [2001](#), p. 219). Burke's ([1945](#)) *pentad* is applauded, for example, by Kärreman ([2001](#)) as the superior perspective for interpreting human conduct in terms of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose within a social context. Rather than get into a paradigm battle of whose theory of dramaturgy is the most dramaturgical, we would like to see both as aspects of the ongoing dialectic of organizing. First, we need to explore how Burke's approach is literal, not metaphorical.

Burke's dramaturgic *pentad* has been used widely to analyze organizations as theatres of action (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, [1991](#); Mangham & Overington, [1987](#); Pine & Gilmour, [1999](#)). Czarniawska ([1997](#)), for example, explores how the identities of organizational actors are constituted theatrically through role-playing and image construction. There is an illusion of coherence between person/character, story/history, and performer/audience sustained in the modern theatrics of management studies that is simultaneously uncovered in postmodern theatrics (Czarniawska, 1997, pp. 184-185). Pine and Gilmour ([1999](#)) use Burke's dramaturgism to assert work *is* theatre and every business is a stage. In addition, ways of transforming organizations are mainly theatrical in character. Much of our organizational life is carefully scripted; we play out our scenes in organizationally approved dress codes and play the game by available rules of conduct. Changing an organization is changing the script, re-scripting performances with new characterizations.

Tragedy, Comedy, and Episodic theatre for Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1450, verse b, p. 4) is the "imitation of action" for theatre "imitates the personal agents." In other words, theatre imitates life. Using Aristotle's *Poetics* terminology (the six elements of drama), theatre imitates life: it abstracts fewer *plot* elements,

characters, themes, less dialog, a more stylized rhythm, and can embellish with more spectacle. Aristotle believed that the plot was most important to tragedy, followed by characters, theme, dialog, and rhythm, with spectacle as the least necessary. We will argue in our section on dialectic of metaphor and literal theatre that spectacle has now assumed first place.

We note that Aristotle seems to have been aware of both the literal aspects of theatre imitating life and theatre as a metaphor for life. Few scholars in organization studies look at the relationship of Burke's and Aristotle's approaches to theatre. Burke (1945, p. 231), for example, aligns Aristotle's six *Poetics* elements with the five terms of the *Pentad*. Burke's act is Aristotle's plot, agent is character, purpose is theme, agency combines aspects of dialog and rhythm, and scene is spectacle. Burke's purpose is not to imitate Aristotle, but to stretch the frame to accommodate more contemporary life situations. It is worth noting that Aristotle uses terms that Burke defines differently in the *Pentad*. For example, Aristotle uses agent and character interchangeable, acts are seen by Aristotle as incidents in the story or plot. Aristotle is also aware of the imitative and metaphoric aspects. Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448, verse a, p. 5), for example, notes that theatre (painting, dancing, and poetry) can present "agents" just as we are, better than we are, or worse than we are in theatre and other poetic forms.

As Aristotle tells the history of theatre, it began as imitative of "real" life. His observations parallel those of Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* (characters being in and out of frame). An agent, says Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448, verse b, p. 23) uses means, objects, and their manner differently to "(1) speak at one moment in narrative and at another in an assumed character, as Homer does; or (2) one may remain the same throughout without any such change; or (3) the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described."

Finally, Aristotle seems aware of how theatre evolves from life. This view is Aristotle's (*Poetics*, 1449, verse a, pp. 10-36) progression of the evolution of theatre. First, the number of actors increased from one to two, then many (a plurality). Second, dialog increasingly played a leading part in the play. Third, scenery was added although it was thought as unnecessary spectacle since the acts tell the story. Fourth, short stories were discarded in favor of longer ones, that could go an all day, and night, and even for several days. The one act became a plurality of episodes or acts. In comparing Tragedy, and Epic Story, Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1449, verse b, p. 14) distinguishes the former "as far as possible [keeping] within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that." Fifth, the dialog took on metered then trochaic and iambic tones. Sixth, someone supplied Theatre with masks, costumes, songs, musicians, and prologues. If this progression is at all accurate history, then to say that theatre is a metaphor of organizations is only half the story. Theatre imitates life; if organization imitates theatre, then, this but completes a very long circle.

Burke's Approach to Framing

Burke set his works on dialectical frames against the dialectics of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. Burke's (1937) *Attitudes Toward History* is, for us, his more sociological development of the frame and framing process. He begins by defining how frames are comprised of terms that are attitudinal and are also processes. For example a "comic frame" is about processes such as the "bureaucratization of the imaginative," which happens "when men try to translate some pure aim or vision into terms of its corresponding material embodiment" (Burke, 1937, p. iii). This embodiment incorporates a "reduction to utilitarian routines" in ways that are "mildly Machiavellian" (Burke, 1937, p. v). Burke's exploration of attitude is much more sociological than his earlier presentations because of his deeper exploration of the process of grand narrating (cf. Lyotard, 1979).

How does this relate to transformation? Burke (1937, pp. 20-25) rejects both the progress myth and the Meliorist position suggesting these are "frames of acceptance" that over-emphasize what is favorable and under-emphasize any unfavorable consequences. The "progress myth" (cf. Lyotard, 1979), for example, assumes that human conditions of working and living improve through science and technology. A Meliorist believes that the world naturally tends to get better and that this tendency can be furthered by human effort. Burke rejects both as an "idiotic tragedy" because they assume improvements occur through an acceptance of the bureaucratization of initiative and "mistaken heroics of war."

Burke's (1937, pp. 20-25) dialectic between "frames of acceptance" and "frames of rejection" is critical to our thesis of transformation. Frames center attention on some practical/critical factors but draw attention away from others that are ignored or marginalized. A frame of acceptance focuses on the favorable and can be both Tragic and Comic. In the Tragic Frame the heroic agent is magnified as embodying the historical drama (e.g., Hitler and Stalin). The tragic scene is accepted by the agent (character): "what can we do, but nothing at all?" The Comic Frame accepts the feebleness of the anti-hero, caught in acts of "happy stupidity" partaking in *Carpe Diem* (snatching in the Ode, whatever mild pleasures are at hand). A frame of rejection focuses on the unfavorable, for example on the "culturally dispossessed" (Burke, 1937, p. 40-41). Satire, particularly Burlesque and Grotesque versions, is an example of frames of rejection: The Burlesque reduces the situation to its absurdity, in polemic or caricature (Burke, 1937, p. 55), the Grotesque Frame can be a surrender in "ironic humility" to the misfortune that is all around such that defeatism and escapism are stressed as options. In the Burlesque Frame of Feudalism, the serf is bound to the soil through duties and obligations. Burke (1937, pp. 56-57) also sees the trade union movement as Burlesque, re-introducing ambivalence in property relations, dissolving private ownership by insisting upon worker rights:

Significantly, it is the theoreticians behind Lewis's C.I.O. who are re-introducing into America the concept of ambivalence in property relationships. They are proceeding, roughly, as follows: Beginning with the recognition of the worker's obligations, they are insisting that rights match these obligations. Hence, under the stimulus of their thinking, an economist writing in the daily press said recently: Labor has a property right in skill, an ownership right in the job, an investment interest in income. Extend the concepts of property and ownership in this way, with institutions in keeping, and the classical co-ordinates of private ownership are automatically dissolved.

The Grotesque Frame for Burke is highly Superrealist, such as in Nietzsche's writing when lightning strikes to reveal a hidden (grotesque) landscape or in Joyce when the lights go out and workers can see a deeper understanding by seeing in the dark. The Grotesque Frame breaks the Public Frame that people accept as common sense. The worker, when the lightning strikes or the lights go out, comes face-to-face with a bad economic system and could heed the call for a revolutionary shift in attitudes. The dialectic Burke (1937, p. 70) raises is that "Grotesque" can become "Natural" to the social order as its "imaginative ingredients" become "bureaucratized."

Burke (1945) argues that other approaches to dialectic have "repeatedly lost track of [their] dramatic origins, when thinkers lay all their stress upon the attempt to decide whether it [dialectic] leads to true knowledge, or when they have so rigidified its forms in some particular disposition of terms (or dogma) that the underlying liquidity of its Grammar becomes concealed" (p. 243). Burke (1945) finds Marx and Hegel too idealistic in their dialectic scheme and terminology (pp. 238-239). Marx, for Burke, is too polemic, a constant moralizing, a rage against the excess of capitalism rather than a dialectic (as Burke would have it be). Burke (1945, pp. 239-242) looks at Aristotle's dialectic; the "inside the skin" in opposition to the "outside the skin," the opposition of "unspeakable" and "verbal" levels. We can see this theme played out in *A Grammar of Motives* (Burke, 1945). Advertisers, Burke says, want us to just respond to their messages, without any pause for reflection: We hesitate to think critically of our mental attitudes and what act we will choose (Burke, 1945, p. 242). But, we can create space -- a pause in which we can forestall the act or reaction to such a stimulus. It is in this space we can create transformation. We suggest a dialectic perspective, one that returns an Aristotelian look at both metaphoric and literal aspects of the theatrics of organization offers a way of creating such a space for critical reflection.

A Dialectic Perspective

There are two ways we can theorize the dialectic of theatre-as-organizing opposed to theatre-is-organizing. One way would be to follow Kärreman (2001) and look at the transition from modern to the more postmodern dramaturgy of Baudrillard. We prefer a second option to follow the more "critical postmodern" approach of dramaturgy in Guy Debord (it is critical in being rooted in the dialectic of Marx, but postmodern in looking at the accumulation of consumption rather than production). We will briefly contrast the two approaches before proceeding.

Kärreman (2001, p. 90) sees Baudrillard (1988, 1993) as the successor to Goffman and Burke's

dramaturgical perspectives. He sees Baudrillard's idea of simulacra having dramaturgical significance because it provides "various ways scripting occurs in organizations" (Kärreman, 2001, p. 90). Baudrillard, we believe, is excessively radical in assuming that society has left modern organization behind to enter the third simulacra of hyperreality. This assumption is evident in his secessionist theory: A first order simulacrum is representational practices of "imitation, for counterfeiting, of creating perfect copies of real" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 51). A second order simulacrum is large-scale industrial production and reproduction in which meaning is not in "origin" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 55). Third order simulacra is the world of the hyperreal, the map becomes more real than the territory (Baudrillard, 1993). In short, Baudrillard posits that we have left the pre-modern (feudal) first simulacra era of representation, surpassed the modern industrial era of reproduction, and entered the third epoch of the hyperreal.

Instead of Baudrillard, we prefer Debord (1967) as a less radical postmodern perspective, agreeing with Latour (1993) that we have never been modern. Rather, we are in a hybridity of feudal, modern, and postmodern epochs. While there has been a postmodern turn (Best & Kellner, 1993, 1997, 2001), it is not complete and not without opposition or hybridity. The postmodern turn has changed the dominant theatrics of our epoch, but not completely replaced predecessors. Our view is that we are in a dialectical process of several dramaturgical perspectives.

Our third, more dialectic view is that *theatre is both life and metaphor*. We develop this dialectic view of theatre by contrasting how Debord's *Society of Spectacle* (1967) is theatrically opposed by what Bakhtin calls the "carnavalesque of resistance." Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) also presents a dialectic view looking at how theatre can be used to empower spectators to become *spect-actors*. Our implication is a possibility of critical consciousness and praxis that transforms the formal Spectacle through experiments in emancipatory Carnival-like theatre. To enter into a critical postmodern perspective of theatre and organization life, we first must discuss the differences between modern theatre and postmodern theatre.

In premodern and modern theatre there is one stage, one script, one audience, and a linear storyline. Postmodern theatre is a "Tamara" (Boje, 1995) of many stories on many stages with the audience participating in the production and consumption of the drama. Premodern and modern theatre present unified characters, while postmodern theatre presents a series of character fragments and separate identity poses without unification. Premodern and modern theatre present a storyline, while postmodern theatre resists closure, leaving events fragmented and unexplained (Simard, 1984). There is a premodern search for divine meaning, a postmodern refusal of closure, and a modern form of resistance to script changes. There is no resolution of the oppositions of premodern, modern, and postmodern theatrics. It is a hybridity. Modern theatre offers narrative coherence that postmodern theatre protests. Postmodern theatre seeks to expand the complexity and heterogeneity that a coherence and unity narrative excludes. Coherence is attained in the partial reading of complex and unstable texts. Postmodern theatre, which represents an ideological critique of coherence, offers multiple voices, multiple meanings, and multiple stories (Currie, 1998; Geis, 1993; Simard, 1984). A recent abundance of postmodern books gives increased attention to the postmodern themes of postmodern theatric[k]s (Geis, 1993), postmodern/drama (Simard, 1984; Watt, 1998; Whitmore, 1994), postmodern fables (Lyotard, 1979), postmodern narrative theory (Currie, 1998), postmodern environmental ethics (Oelschlaeger, 1997; Pulido, 1996), postmodern cosmology (Rifkin, 1998), and theatres of consumption (Firat and Dholakia, 1998).[ii]

Debord's (1967) concept of "spectacle" represents a mechanism for de-politicization and pacification of social forces by distracting actors "from the most urgent task of real life: recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice" (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 84). Spectacle is a narrative and a theatric performance that legitimates, rationalizes, and camouflages production and consumption. Late capitalism, according to Debord, enables social control in organization through a celebration of manic consumption and production, a masquerade of individual development and social progress that is really an abuse of labor and of ecology. "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, 1967, #4) [iii]. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the dominant model of social life. Spectacle builds on Marx's concept of commodity fetish, "where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible

par excellence" (Debord, [1967](#), #36). Or in the words of Best and Kellner ([1997](#), p. 88):

When images determine and overtake reality, life is no longer lived directly and actively. The spectacle involves a form of social relations in which individuals passively consume commodity spectacles and services without active and creative involvement.

The spectacle is the material re-construction of the transcendent search. "The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (Debord, [1967](#), #42). It is the point when life becomes theatre, where the line between theatre-as-metaphor and life-is-theatre becomes so blurred we no longer pause to reflect on the difference.

Workers, managers, owners, customers, consultants, and activists are all designers, reformers, and accumulators of spectacles of organizational life. The spectacle (from a critical postmodern view) is, above all, a legitimating mechanism of social control that masquerades as a celebration of individual "betterment" by recycling pseudo-reforms as social progress. Spectacles equate material accumulation with happiness while ignoring the three billion people living on less than a dollar a day and the exhaustion of finite planet resources. Organizational researchers need to be able to read spectacle behavior, to know how actors change spectacles through the "will to power" (Nietzsche, [1956](#)), and to understand the consequences of spectacle management. Spectacle, from our dialectic view, is accompanied by resistance (i.e., carnival).

Carnival is a theatrics of rant and madness seeking to repair felt separation and alienation. It is a call for release from corporate power, a cry of distress and repression mixed with laughter and humorous exhibition meant to jolt state and corporate power into awareness of the psychic cage of work and consumptive life. The carnival aspect of our dialectic approach is derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's ([1984](#)) writings on the feudal carnival feast as a moment of time where there is a temporary liberation from the established order, a "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (p. 10).

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (Bakhtin, [1981](#), p. 7).

Bakhtin used the term "carnival" to identify an atmosphere of revelry that allowed a space to critique rigid social authority. For a time, the metaphor of theatre subsumes the social scene into carnival. Carnavalesque has four themes: the tumultuous crowd, the world turned upside-down, the comic mask and the grotesque body. Carnival puts Burke's grotesque (frame of rejection) center stage. Its main purpose is to create spaces of social and individual regeneration and renewal with a connection to laughter. "They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance" (Bakhtin, [1984](#), p. 9). Renaissance carnival, mocking authority figures and parodying official ideas of society, history and fate, has continued into our era. True carnival is a questioning of the prevailing norms of society through loving parody (Boje, [2001](#); Mueller, [2000](#)). Carnival laughter is directed at those who laugh, it accepts one's wholeness in the world (Bakhtin, [1984](#), p. 12). With death (in laughter and in body), human life is given birth.

Implications

What are the implications of theatre-is-organizing and theatre-is-like-organizing for organizational and social transformation? The dialectic of Spectacle and Carnival offer room for critique and change if we look at both from the perspective of "will to power" -- the ability to make one's view of the world that which others live in (Nietzsche, [1956](#)). Spectacle suggests the "will to power" is based on the active production and passive consumption of images, that is, based on social control.

Specifically, Spectacle offers a metaphor for understanding why we, as producers and consumers of

products, services, and images may willingly accept a life scripted by others who are better storytellers and theatric performers. It is a point where we inhabit the theatre metaphor and do not seek options.

Carnival, by contrast, suggests the will to power is based on our ability to create reflective space -- recognize, critique, and create new images. The performance of Carnival pushes us to focus on individual, or group, acts of "reflectiveness" as human agents (Winch, 1958) against prescribed official roles. Winch (1958) informs us that individuals are capable of "self-conscious interpretations" of social structures to bring about new practices, and eventually new orders (below we look at this as Boal's critical consciousness). The possibility of change is created when Winch (1958, pp. 45-65) interprets Wittgenstein's (1974) concept of language game as the dynamic relationship between "meaningful behavior" (the application of rules in a social context), "habit" (the propensity to continue with the same behavior), and "reflectiveness" (an awareness of possible alternative rules) -- a possibility through carnival performance. When "the lightning strikes," actors within an organization do have some power to resist the spectacle of social order, and to possibly link with other outside forces of liberation.

Thus, our two key concepts for our performance metaphor, spectacle and carnival, set the stage to understand why those far from power willingly accept a life scripted and authorized by others who are merely better storytellers and theatric performers. Our dialectic perspective calls for an inquiry into ideological legitimization of organization life through discursive practices of power.

Our critical postmodern perspective is that corporate theatre is a refined and carefully scripted repertoire of theatrical illusions, but as these intermingle with the movements of anti-globalization and their penchant for the carnivalesque, sometimes the theatre and counter-theatre spins out of authorial control and into the abyss of chaos. An example of spectacle in dialectic opposition to carnival is the 400,000 WTO carnivalesque protestors facing the spectacle of police overdressed in Vader masks and riot gear facing protestors costumed in sea-turtle shells, or ladies prancing with "Better Naked than Nike" or "BGH-free" scrawled across their chests and backs, and gigantic puppets and floating condoms the size of blimps with the words "Practice Safe Trade" (Boje, 2001, p. 431). Like the carnival of the Middle Ages, this example calls to mind images of outrageous mocking of medieval buffoonery, the parody of religion and crown, nakedness, masks and costumes. This was also apparent in Woodstock, in the 1968 Paris, and the Vietnam War and civil rights protests of that era.

A critical postmodern analysis of spectacle and carnival is, we believe, compatible with much of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* work. Boal (1979, 1992, 1995) has done pioneering, groundbreaking work interrelating capitalism and theatre. For Boal, capitalism is constituted in a series of oppressions where some actors have become seduced into passive roles in the theatrics of capitalism, thus, they have become spectators to Aristotle's spectacle. Goffman keeps the frame as a separation between actor and audience, between back and front stage. By contrast, Boal wants each spectator to mount the stage and become an actor, to be what he terms "spect-actor."

In order to understand *Theatre of the Oppressed*, we have to keep in mind Boal's (1979, p. 122) objective: "To change the people -- 'spectators,' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon -- into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action." Boal modifies Aristotle's *Poetics* in which the spectator delegates the power of thinking and reflecting to the dramatic character. Rather, Boal (1979) follows Brecht, in proposing "a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself" (p. 122). Boal transforms the catharsis purpose of Aristotle's tragedy, which was to purge the individual spectator of a "tragic flaw," and in its place seeks to purge the society of its dreadful oppressions.

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, for example, there is an awakening of "critical consciousness" on the part of the spectator, who self-empowers to assume the protagonist role, changing from passive spectator to active *spect-actor* (Boal, 1979, p. 122). In subsequent work, Boal develops three forms of theatre that can raise critical consciousness: Image Theatre, Invisibility Theatre, and Forum Theatre.

Image Theatre. Image theatre sets up a stage, in which we can see the body motions and interactions, in what is known as a body sculpture. For example, we have been experimenting with having students enact

scenes of McDonalidization, based upon their experiences as customers and workers at McDonald's and other fast food or franchise establishments. Thus, a team of students might stage an Image Theater of McDonald's that would be collective, animated, body sculpture. The rhythm (Aristotle's term) of the dynamization is fast, repetitive, and mechanistic. As the students create body sculpted images of various oppressions on stage, they can then move on to rescript the poses, animate alternative interactions, and get some reflective discussion of what a more ideal *Image Theatre* would look like; they de-McDonalidize. From a critical postmodern perspective of carnival resisting spectacle, McDonalidization is a rigid theater resisted by workers tired of minimum wage and being treated like robots with only unskilled job options, resisted by managers who also perform like robots following very tightly coordinated scripts, and by consumers who hate fast food (others love it, think it's like church, very routine, worship at the Golden Arches).

Invisibility Theatre. There are two types of Invisibility Theatre. "Invisibility Theater is not realism; it is reality" (Boal, 1992, p. 15). Aristotle's *Poetics*, for Boal, is the means which theatre is used by the power elite to purge the public spectators through catharsis of any urge to rebel against the status quo; rebelling becomes the tragic flaw to purge. Invisibility Theatre reverses this, rendering the superstructure of the status quo visible and subject to spect-actor's critical consciousness. Boal, for example developed scripts with roles for actors, and then did the shows in the Paris Metro, on ferryboats, in restaurants, and on the streets of cities such as Stockholm. This type of Invisibility Theatre seduces spectators into becoming accompanying actors in the drama. The public moves out of its sleep walking role to become active spectators, who act in a piece of theatre; they become spect-actors in their own life; through the play, they reflect on their roles, life scripts, and more oppressive plots they take for granted. While Invisibility Theatre happens and even after the event, the spect-actors do not know it is "theatre time" rather than just more "real life." The point of Invisible Theater is to bring the offstage and the beneath the stage up front and personal onto the center stage. The spect-actors turn into spect-actors, participating in rescripting the oppression played out on the stage.

Forum Theatre. Forum Theater is rehearsal, a game, in which the rules of the game of power and oppression are made very explicit. Game rules can be modified by participants (Boal, 1992, p. 18). In Forum Theatre, the spectator becomes the protagonist trying to overcome the oppression presented by the antagonists (oppressors). Audience members can yell, "stop" and substitute themselves for one of the characters. This way they can try out new behaviors, or experiment with new solutions to various forms of oppression. The boundary between audience and actors is no more; spectators crosses the sacred proscenium arch and go on stage; they become spect-actors. And they become co-directors, all helping to stage the game; they coach role players, and suggest rule changes, and script changes. For example, in working with Forum Theatre, female students experimented with various way to deal with sexual harassment. There were lots of calls to "Stop" and a new protagonist entered the scene to try out a new way of dealing with a male that keep demanding sexual favors. All of a sudden, someone asked for a script change; they wanted to reverse the situation and have females harassing males. When one solution seemed to work, then there were calls to "Stop" once again, and try new oppressive tactics. The game continues until people are confident they have found solutions to oppressive situations that are important to their life space.

In sum, the empowered "critically conscious" spect-actor is thus able to change the dramatic action, trying out solutions in Image, Invisibility, and Forum Theatre exercises.

Theatre of the Oppressed uses theatre as what Boal calls a rehearsal for revolution by liberated spectators, now spect-actors. Goffman (1974) would also term this a rehearsal. Burke would see Boal's use of theatre as agency, as a tool (technology) to accomplish the revolution. We would look at it as competing frames, those in power using theatre's agency to control the public, and those seeking revolution are using theatre to liberate a critical consciousness of hegemonic oppression.

We conclude that theatre is both metaphor and literal, and in the postmodern turn the difference is blurred, but can be critically recovered. Our lives in organizations are not a choice between Aristotle, Burke, and Goffman approaches to dramaturgy. As Boal and Debord show, we can engage in social experiments that create critical consciousness and develop alternative scripts and characterizations. We are not just passive spectators; we have the capacity to be actors and script editors, and we can change the spectacle. The perineum arch no longer divides spectator from actor. Spectacle, as we discussed, is resisted by carnival.

Goffman and Aristotle keep us aware of the limits of the theatre metaphor. Burke lets us see how scripted and dramatic our lives are on a daily base. It is Debord and Boal that invite us to change the spectacle of daily living.

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End Notes

[1] See <http://www.epimenides.com/Content/WhyEpimenides.asp>

[i] **Kärreman** (2001: 106) is building on observations by Gusfield (1989: 36-37) that Goffman uses dramaturgy terms such as actor and stage metaphorically, while Burke uses them as literal.

[ii] A review of postmodern organization theory is beyond the scope of this paper. The interested reader is referred to Hassard &

Parker (1993), Alvesson & Deetz (1996), Boje, & Gephart & Thatchenkery (1996).

[iii] In this paper we refer to the numbered paragraphs of Debord's (1970) text rather than page numbers from a specific printing because many different editions of *The Society of the Spectacle* are available (including one pirated edition and a full reprint on the Web at <http://www.nothingness.org/Situationist International/journal.html>). This style is conventional when using Debord's work (see Best & Kellner, 1997).