

**INSIDE THE
RABELAISIAN
SILENI BOX**

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Professor David M. Boje is the agent provocateur of the postmodern era. Famed as a scholar, one of those precious few scholars who can actually make postmodernism accessible and meaningful, David provokes us through the gift of perspective. David's work moves us by giving us insight into the unseen and by helping us to engage the mystery that lies just beyond our regular comprehension. And if we consider perspective gaining for a moment, we find that is exactly what our scholarly work is about: We give the gift of perspective, for with new perspectives our students, and indeed all of us, move forward. As you read David's address, you will find yourself provoked through a story of Bakhtin and dialogue, murals and McDonald's. David moves us to realize the power we scholars have through our gifts of language and knowledge to create perspective, to enable, and to move forward.

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You are all very fortunate. Many a scholar, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, never received a doctorate and thus never had to sit through commencement addresses. Bakhtin was born November 17, 1895. Between 1927 and 1929 he produced a book every year under the names of other authors. Still 90% of the books were scribed by Bakhtin according to Bakhtinian scholar Michael Holquist (1981, pp. xxvi, xxxiv).¹ How could he be so unconcerned about authorship? In 1937 he had to stop teaching courses and moved to the Russian city of Kimry where he wrote a book on the German novel, and the publisher's only copy disappeared during the German invasion. Bakhtin smoked the other copy, rolling bits of the manuscript into cigarettes and working from the back to the front until it was entirely burned. After enduring the amputation of his leg in 1938, Bakhtin submitted his completed dissertation to his committee in Moscow in 1940. His dissertation was a carnivalesque theory of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais's novel, and it was a history of grotesque humor. I often wonder as I read Bakhtin if his dismembered leg had something to do with his choice of dissertation topic.

Because of World War II, the dissertation could not be defended until 1946 when the committee failed to reach a decision. The final defense was held in 1949, and the Moscow faculty argued and debated with one meeting lasting 7 hours. Finally, the committee elected to pass Bakhtin, but the other professors of the university intervened to oppose acceptance. At an impasse, the State Accrediting Bureau of the Soviet Union stepped in to end the ordeal, and

that is the story of how Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin never received his doctorate.

In 1971, Bakhtin's wife Elena died, and he became quite depressed. He recovered briefly in 1973 to 1974 and scribed some really important theory in his schoolboyish composition notebooks (the one with 200 ruled pages available for 99¢ in your local Wal-Mart). I think about all his writing and about how his friends recovered bits and pieces of his work in a rat-infested shed or grabbed a few pages before Bakhtin had a chance to smoke them all. It seems that once the writing was done he was quite cavalier about it. Perhaps working on great problems and putting his dialogic imagination to work was all he required.

Bakhtin died March 7, 1975, an indigent unable to finish his final projects, many of them lost, denied, or smoked. Yale, I hear, was about to award him an honorary doctorate, but he never got that either.

Reflecting on Bakhtin's story, I think there are some lessons we can decipher. First, throughout his work are references to Marx, a lifelong project of critical theory to reimagine dialectic as dialogue. This is a move that would radically undo organizational scholarship. I want to work through a brief example, but first I will list the other lessons.

Second, for me, is learning how to write. This past year I have been getting up at 4:30 a.m. or 5:30 a.m. every morning, reading pages of Bakhtin and engaging in a dialogue with him, and scribing a few hours of thought into a schoolboyish 99¢ composition notebook. I find that this works better for me than just hitting the computer keyboard. In fact, as a request for me to write comes in, such as James Barker's request for this commencement address, I open the most recent notebook and see what is there. I recall a dinner with the philosopher Ivan Illich who said he could always tell when a piece was written on a computer first instead of in longhand.

Third, after 25 years of narrative research I find that Bakhtin has a lesson to teach anyone who cares about storytelling. This morning I was working my way through the opening pages of "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" (Holquist, 1981). I have finished several notebooks on Rabelais and speech genre and even one on François Rabelais's 1532 novel. In talking about the epic and novel, Bakhtin scribes the most amazing sen-

tences. Taking a dig at contemporary novel theory Bakhtin wrote, “The primordial process of their formation lies outside historically documented observation” (Holquist, 1981, p. 4). Or how about, “the novel is not merely one genre among other genres” or that “this explains the extraordinary difficulty in formulating a theory of the novel” (Holquist, 1981, p. 4).

This brings me to my illustration. I want to radically unravel the canon of organization strategy. I have taken a widely accepted canon: A McDonald’s restaurant is standard, rational, highly controlled, and in some cases described as mechanistic, Tayloristic, Fordist, and in recent decades post-Fordist. Michaela Driver, Yue Cai, and I (Boje, Driver, & Cai, 2004) reviewed 51 academy articles on McDonald’s strategy, and this is what is presumed. But we did find one mention, you know, in that string of names and dates that trail sentences we are trained in doctoral programs to write, a lonely mention of George Ritzer’s (2002) work on McDonaldization. The puzzle is this: How is it that a corporation is an imperial force, globalization power, and colonizer of local culture when it is also adapting locally with vegetarian burgers for India, kosher meals for Israel, rice for Japan, and a Big Mac with green chilies where I live? How is this simultaneous, globalized standard rational and localization possible? We did not find strategy theory that convincing and, with one exception, nothing about language. So I decided, because I must address you, the new organization studies doctorate holder, I would look to Bakhtin for some radical and critical theory.

What if we think of each McDonald’s restaurant as a novel: multigenre, dialogic, primordial, and situated historically? Several Bakhtinian questions come to mind.

First, if strategy is dialogic then who is the primary and secondary voice in this dialogue? The corporation as a global giant speaks but so do the local novelesque restaurants. If McDonald’s is monological strategy then corporate talks and without answering back the local outlet goes along. Yet if Las Cruces, New Mexico, my current residence, is any example then this is not the case. My narrative methods class this term has been conducting ethnographies on the eight McDonald’s locations in our city. All eight have unique exterior and interior architecture and are painted differently. Three have PlayPlaces and five do not (actually, the number is four and a half if you count the fact that 2 years ago the El Paseo location had

its PlayPlace torn down—too many teenagers with hormones were hanging out). Now not only the architecture but the standard verbal greeting of “Welcome to McDonald’s, how may I help you?” is not practiced except when a trainee is directly supervised in training. Otherwise, the greetings vary from none to “Hi” to “What do you want?” And no server, despite reporting having gone to smile and laughter training, ever smiles.

Second, I have to tell you about the mural. Two of the eight locations are at our Wal-Mart superstores; why we need two, I still do not know. There is a McDonald’s strategically positioned, but differently, in each Wal-Mart. Here there are some smiling and quite friendly greetings with lots of laughter, but it is between the Wal-Mart employees on their lunch break and the McDonald’s crew members. One Wal-Mart is older by 5 years, so they located the McDonald’s in the back end of the superstore. It is more of an employee lunchroom. Oh, and this is the only Las Cruces location where you can buy a 3-gallon bag of McDonald’s popcorn. The other superstore has its McDonald’s right at the front entrance behind where you pick up your cart and enter the food section. By the way, since opening the first superstore five local supermarkets have closed. What I want to tell you about is the mural in this newest superstore that only opened last year.

The story is fantastic, bizarre, and in many Bakhtinian ways very grotesque. I would not have thought it remarkable if I were not so immersed in McDonald’s history books and transcribing six McDonaldland videotapes—the ones done by Klasky-Csupo and released between 1998 and 2002. These images present the newly fashioned Ronald McDonald, a much perkier and older Birdie, and a Hamburglar in sunglasses and a denim jacket instead of an eye mask and a cape. Grimace looks about the same but has two arms instead of the four from his debut in 1971, and there are new characters such as Tika, an African American teen, and Franklin, a White teen whose dad is a scientist. Anyway, without going into more detail, let us say I can spot repeated and unrepeated versions of cartoon clowns from various historical periods.

When I looked at the mural I was flabbergasted and blown away. There are actually two murals. One is on the back wall: a 5-foot image of Speedee (Richard McDonald drafted him on a bit of paper sometime in 1946 or 1947) mounted atop the Airdrome, which is

called that because it was near an airport and octagonal. I looked to my right and there was a 25-foot mural from table height to the top of the ceiling. It was fantastically done and artistic with lots of colors and lots of gleam, but historically it was full of incongruities.

You are all scholars so you appreciate incongruities, the thrill of the chase, and sorting out aesthetic blunders. But were these incongruities strategic? On the right mural sat a second Speedee emblazoned in neon on a single golden arch holding a sign that read "15¢." The sign is to the left of the double-arch restaurant, a design that Richard McDonald drew, overcoming the objections of an architect who said it did not look right. The first one was erected in the first franchise in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1953.

Then I saw her: a pretty teenage, White girl in a knee length poodle skirt standing tiptoed on her roller skates (you know, like when you dig in the rubber toe stops to come to a halt). She is carrying a serving tray with a burger, fries, and Coca-Cola drink. This is just wrong; it is a total fantasy. History did not happen this way. You see, Richard and Maurice McDonald had carhops between 1940 and 1948 then fired them all. It was not until 1953 when the first double-arched McDonald's, the one at which Speedee was the clown prince, reigned supreme. So there were no carhops then, and there was certainly not a gleaming 1950 Mercury or 1955 and 1957 Ford Fairlane. No, it did not happen this way. The McDonald brothers did not hire carhops after 1948. When they did hire them they wore miniskirts and sexy, clingy satin blouses, not poodle skirts. It was sex not crisp French fries or cheap burgers that got 125 cars to park bumper to bumper night after night.

I began to take a closer look. Perhaps this restaurant in the mural was in California where there were 60 of the double-arch models. Let us just ignore the gorgeous brunette in the poodle skirt. Look at the ethnic diversity. I do not think that the double-arched restaurants in 1954 to 1960 or the Airdrome in 1940 to 1948 had such ethnic diversity. Everyone is smiling: the carhop (sorry, I said I would stop mentioning her), the two Black couples, the Hispanic car club enthusiasts, the Black girl on the bicycle, the White couple being waited on, and the two White couples in the 1955 Ford. They are all smiles, and above them Speedee has that one-eyed wink.

You are probably wondering what is radical about this or what it has to do with strategy? McDonald's is not canon. It is still histori-

cally active, in the Bakhtinian sense. It is renewing, still young, and able to uncrown Ronald, its contemporary clown prince, and recrown the first prince, Speedee. But I need to fill in one more field observation. OK, maybe two.

Almost excluded from the restaurant to the left of the counter on the boundary between Wal-Mart and McDonald's is a life-size statue of Ronald. Behind him is a mirror and in the mirror is a shadowy image of Ronald's clown head. I can hear him screaming and raging: "Hell, I'm the clown prince. I refuse to be marginalized. What the heck is Speedee doing here? I thought he was dead and buried?" For you Bakhtinians you have to read the significance of the metamorphosis, transformation, cohabitation, and unholy marriage of two giant corporate bodies, both apparently male (but I will not go there).

In grotesque humor it is the body, in this case the corporate body, that is exaggerated (murals full of hyperbole) and two clown, symbol images of corporate body, Ronald and McDonald, are having a dialogue that for some reason only I can hear. And then if you know Bakhtin's work on Rabelais then you know how important the image of devour and devouring or swallow and swallowing is. For here we have one giant corporation about to swallow another. But as I stand here I am filled with ambivalence: Is McDonald's swallowing Wal-Mart or is Wal-Mart swallowing McDonald's? The other Wal-Mart carefully put McDonald's in the back of the store: They know the power of the gaping corporate mouth. But here on Valley Boulevard this Wal-Mart has incorporated McDonald's into its just-in-time computerized checkout system. Just step up to any store register and order a Big Mac and it will be ready with fries and a Coke on your way out of the superstore. Does Wal-Mart know what it is doing by letting Big Mac into its computer system?

I know for the critical theorists in the crowd you are wondering about resistance. Well there is some. Juxtaposed with the mural (with the carhop, whoops) is a mop, and its handle points at the image, at the laughing ethnic equanimity, sort of scoffing at the corporate utopia. And seated at the booths are several Wal-Mart employees, and on their uniformed backs it says "How may I help you?" The counter people throughout Las Cruces are not smiling and are refusing to say the greeting. Why smile for minimum wage. Emblazoned on this counter is an M with a slash through it, a sym-

bol that is all golden yellow and about 10 inches high. I ask, “What does that M with the slash mean?” The crew member replies, “I don’t know?” Then I rush home and pull out my copy of Michael Karl Witzel’s *The American Drive-In Restaurant*, and there on page 90 is that same M with the line through it. No, it does not mean stop McDonald’s. It is once again Richard McDonald with his design for the sloping roof that cuts through the two golden arches.

In closing, I want to leave you with a Rabelaisian image from the preface to his book one. The Sileni box has lots of harmless-looking, clownish figures painted and sculpted on the exterior. Inside the Sileni box vendors of the marketplace hid many important treasures. Inside Bakhtin’s Sileni box there lies treasure hidden away for you to discover that can topple corporate giants. All the best in your chosen life as scholars, and be glad your dissertation was not rejected like that of Mikhail Bakhtin.

NOTE

1. The three books are V. N. Volosinov’s *Freudism: A Marxist Critique* (1927/1976), N. N. Volosinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929/1973), and P. N. Medvdev’s *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928/1978). The dates in parentheses are, respectively, the first printing in Russian and the first English edition.

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