

Enron, Postmodern Capitalism, and Answerability: Introduction to the Enron Special Issue

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Once upon a time I made a promise to my dad (Daniel Q. Boje), to study the relationship between the presidency and the oil industry. This was before the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and before Enron became scandalous. It turns out that Enron was a major contributor to the Bush campaign (for governor, then President), that Enron executives wrote much of the U.S. energy policy, and that Bush's wildcat oil ventures included Enron as a financial partner. All this is now well known.

The articles in the issue speak for themselves. I will not repeat them or summarize them here. Instead I will link the Enron theme to Tamara.

Enron illustrates what happens when a spectacle turns into a scandal; Best and Kellner (2001) call such a scandal a "megaspectacle." The spectacle theatre, for example, of the 6th floor where trades were simulated by secretaries in order to persuade stock analysts that Enron would continue to rise; the spectacle became transparent slide of hand, then megaspectacle, and the off-the-balance-sheet pyramid was no longer believable. The search for someone to blame co-occurred with a new spectacle: to return legitimacy to western capitalism. In the aftermath, Arthur Anderson collapsed, the SEC and Congress promised reforms, the Academy of Management decided no changes were needed in the business school curriculum (no ethics course need be added), and President Bush saw to it that his one time chief campaign contributor, Ken Lay, was led away in handcuffs. Now that there are executive culprits (Fastow, Skilling, & Lay), the system of western capitalism returns to its business.

I would like to call for Enrongate, an inquiry into the role of Enron in construction of the U.S. energy policies in partnership with the Bush/Cheney administration. Yet, this seems a futile gesture. In this Society of the Spectacle (Debord, 1968), leading Lay away in handcuffs substitutes for inquiry. Reporters are embedded into the spectacle, so that the kind of inquiry that Woodward and Bernstein did in Watergate is not going to happen.

We spent time writing articles about Enron (Boje & Rosile, 2002, 2003; Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman, 2004). I think the fascination with Enron is that it gives us some insight into postmodern capitalism. I use the term "postmodern capitalism" to mean the production and consumption of the spectacle (and sometimes the megaspectacle). I am coming to understand that systems are not wholes; as Bakhtin puts it, they are not consummated as wholes. Rather system is a fictive, a phantasmagoria. Not only is Enron a fictive system, a game of liar's poker, it is a part of the fictive system of global capitalism. Not only Bush but elder Bush, and two other presidents, lauded Enron as the symbol of the "new capitalism." Postmodern capitalism is about the creation of value through fiction, through storytelling, through the use of theatre. Instead of lived experience in the blood and sweat of building use value, surplus value now comes from the construction of fictive systems. The idea that there are checks and balances in postmodern capitalism is a giant fiction, a total hyperbole. The idea that Enron was a fully consummated system participates in the fictive system of global capitalism.

In using the term fiction I do not mean there are not "real" consequences: certainly,

millions of pension fund holders, employees of Enron vested in retirement stock, and so forth, all have consequences. The point is that post-modern capitalism is as much fiction as "real," more accurately more fictive than real itself.

The fiction is mediatized; the 6th floor theatric illusions, the spins Lay and Skilling put on their speeches, the search by Congress for someone to play the whistleblower role in the drama, the way executives are led away in handcuffs. This is all the stuff of fiction, a way to get institutional legitimacy to return, once the breach of trust has been made (Turner, 1985).

Bakhtin (1990) raises the question of "answerability" in its relation to art; he does this in his essay "art and answerability," first published in 1919. If Enron and postmodern capitalism are the art of the fictive system then is it appropriate to ask for answerability?

What is our answerability for postmodern capitalism? Western capitalism has a unity of meaning in its spectacle, in the media-events that communicate it, in the training done at the university, and so forth.

We each answer to postmodern capitalism with our life. Enron is rather vulgar theatre, the Darth Vader motif of Skilling, the Jurassic names of the off-the-balance-sheet partnerships, the trips to the strip joints in Houston to seduce this or that investor. The man on the street has little or no sense of answerability when investing in the once great Enron (or all its cousins). The Wal-Mart shopper does not feel answerability for the conditions of sweatshops that turn out the products on the shelves, or the minimalist wages of the Wal-Mart crew, or how they get sent home a few minutes early, now and then, by a computer program, to save a dollar here or there. In Bakhtin's (1919/1990) first known essay he put it this way:

The individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other

in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability.

In our article (Boje & Rosile, 2002), we looked at "Enron Whodunit?" and saw that there were so many ways to point blame, that it encompassed us all. The fictive system depends upon some external person to define its contours, to say these are the elements that are not alien to one another, that are interrelateable as a defining system. Enron answerability, then, depends upon how one defines the Enron system. Personally, I like my dad's way, and define it all the way into the Whitehouse.

Here, I want to stress the answerability of Enron in the fictive system of postmodern capitalism. It is easier to work and shop without answerability. It is easier not to consider the fictive systematicness of postmodern capitalism.

Enron raises important questions about how the fictive system of postmodern capitalism is put together. How is it consummated? For whom, is it consummated? These are questions of the science of Architectonics (Holquist intro to Bakhtin, 1990: x). The consummation of Enron is in the eye of the beholder. The wholeness of the system of global capitalism is also in the eye of the beholder. The wholeness of these systems is fiction; they are more network of fragments than they are a seamless unity.

This all relates back to Tamara. For in Tamara, our participation is situated; we share stories that consummate the system and its aesthetics. There are rooms in Tamara where global capitalism is as yet unconsummated; it is unfinalized, but only here and there. And there are so many points of view and people stepping forward to consummate it so differently, that at best we are left with the Tamara of situated awareness (as opposed to totalized or unitary or universal awareness). In Tamara there is simultaneous theatre in all the various rooms of the mansion of capitalism. There is a struggle among and between rooms to realize

this capitalism, to effect it as a whole activity. There were multiple authors, script editors, and lots of rehearsal to consummate Enron; and this multi-scripting (or in Saval's term, Meta-scripting) substitutes for any sense of being a whole script. An important question does become evident: Who are the authors of the fictive systemicalness I am calling postmodern capitalism? How are the privileged and the marginal stories coming into dialogic interplay in Tamara?

Postmodern capitalism is no replacement for modern capitalism. This is no epoch shift. Rather, the virtuality of media-induced spectacle production enables capitalism to turn in new ways. It is still the same struggle to achieve a whole, to bring about a seamless state of oneness. Postmodern capitalism is a negotiated order, out of a multiplicity of authors, each with a different fictive system, and each with their own scripting for the whole.

Here, I posit one kind of Enron system, and a demand for answerability. I leave the door open to call for different fictive configurations to Enron.

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