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**Title of Paper:** Allegories of storytelling; the workings of story production in organizational sense making processes

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*Text of abstract*

This paper aims at contributing to the theoretical conceptualization of the interplay between story and narrative in organizational sense making processes. It does so by integrating Boje’s perspective on storytelling (1991, 2001, 2008) with Benjamin’s re-interpretation of allegory as a language figure (1998). The argument is that the concept of allegory can deepen the theoretical framework for understanding the workings of the emergent story production in everyday sense making.

*Keywords: Storytelling, allegory, narratives, sense making*

The central argument in Boje’s concept of storytelling as the “preferred sense making currency of human relationships” (Boje 1991, 106) in organizations is that *narrative*, conceived as the retrospective construction of a coherent beginning-middle-end structure, must be counterbalanced with *story*, the non-linear, emergent, un-plotted communicative interactions in everyday organizational life. His claim is that narrative holds a dominant position over story in most narrative approaches to organization studies. This, he argues, results in loosing sight of the central dynamic between narrative, as a means to ‘freeze’ the emergent reality in a coherent whole, and story, which constantly work against and deconstruct this whole by pointing and moving in many directions all at the same time. In this dynamic lies the source of organizational sense making.

Boje’s concept of storytelling has been criticized for been to broad and thus loosing the qualities in story over other forms of communication (Gabriel 2000). This paper responds to this criticism by introducing Benjamin’s *allegorist* as an adequate (post-)modern storyteller into Boje’s theoretical framework.

Benjamin famously diagnosed the art of storytelling as dying (1968). The traditional storyteller spun his tales within a community that shared a common meaningfulness via a grand narrative, which meant that the world appeared as always already interpreted. Thus the aim of storytelling was to pass on an experience that sprung from a shared realm of experience, and therefore was able to communicate wisdom that did not need to be explained to the listeners. This world, says Benjamin, is gone and with it the sense of continuity of experience across generations. In its place has come the ’shock of the new’ (Hughes 1980). Benjamin’s essay is traditionally seen as a lamentation of the modernist experience of loss; here it will be interpreted as a call for new ways of telling, more adequate to a world *not* always already interpreted but instead characterized by polyphony and heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). To answer this call we turn to his concept of allegory.

The allegorist in Benjamin’s reinterpretation is a figure, who creates new patterns of meaning and significance out of existing materials in a constantly emerging process. This process follows the dialectics between ’dispersal’ and ’collectedness’: ”Things are assembled according to their significance; indifference to their existence allowed them to be dispersed again.” (Benjamin 1998, 188) Not having a ‘master-narrative’ to hold things together by infusing them with meaning, they fall apart soon after they are assembled; the allegorist reads new figures into things and events, constantly making new assemblages based on subjective experience. Meaning thus emerges fleetingly as results of processes of de-contextualization and re-contextualization. The workings of these processes will be explored via Eisenstein’s concept of *montage* (Eisenstein 1939) in order to propose a deeper understanding of how story emerges and is negotiated, thus contributing to the theoretical conceptualization of the dynamic interplay between narratives and story in organisational sense making.