text praxis

Digitales Journal für Philologie

Autorin

Nora Berning (London, Canada)

Titel

Narrative Journalism in the Age of the Internet: New Ways to Create Authenticity in Online Literary Reportages

Nora Berning (London / Canada)

Narrative Journalism in the Age of the Internet

New Ways to Create Authenticity in Online Literary Reportages

There is no more fiction or nonfiction – only narrative.
E. L. Doctorow, 1975

The transcendence of objectivity that Doctorow refers to in the realm of literature has found its most fecund counterpart in the profession of journalism at a time when journalists began to experiment with new reporting and writing techniques. Especially with the rise of New Journalism in the 1960s and 70s – a catchall term for a group of journalists and writers that relied predominantly on literary techniques – the scholarly debate about the relationship between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, reached a new dimension.[1] Unlike in the creative arts, the relationship in journalism is not primarily driven by aesthetic demands but is constrained by ethical premises, journalism's professional ideology and not least by financial concerns.[2]

Behind the journalistic principle of ›cultural meaning making‹ lurks the rationale that media's underlying communication infrastructure should ideally function as a democratic public sphere that turns specific current events into topics of broader societal concern.[3] In his master narrative *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas circumscribes the public sphere as a discursive space for reasoned communicative exchange that is based on informed and rational argument.[4] His work has received vociferous criticism, because the author rigorously sidelines aesthetic and affective modes of communication. Moreover, Habermas delineates sharply between particular forms of discourse: A

---

1 | According to Tom Wolfe, one of the key founders of the movement, New Journalism can be seen as synonymous to literary journalism. Likewise literary journalism is commonly referred to as narrative journalism. See Tom Wolfe: *The New Journalism.* New York 1973.

2 | For a discussion of the concept of professional ideology see James W. Carey: »Where Journalism Education Went Wrong«. Paper presented to Journalism Education, the First Amendment Imperative, and the Changing Media Marketplace, held at Middle Tennessee University, 1996. See also Michael Schudson: »The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism«. In: *Journalism* 2.2 (2001), p. 149–170. Regarding the reporter-source relationships see Richard Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek and Janet B. L. Chan: *Negotiating Control.* Toronto 1989.

3 | See Jürgen Habermas: »The Public Sphere«. In: Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (eds.): *Rethinking Popular Culture – Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies.* Berkeley / CA 1991, p. 398–404.

4 | See Jürgen Habermas: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit]. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge / MA 1991.

bifurcation between public and private, state and public sphere, reason and non-reason, ethics and aesthetics, prevents him from seeing how popular culture shapes the contours of the public sphere. With the advent of the Internet as well as the proliferation of new forms of popular culture that are linked to the electronic medium, Habermas's ideas can be seen as a good starting point for inquiring deeper into the role of language and the potential of electronic media.

This essay, which consists mainly of two case studies of online literary reportages, draws upon a multi-method approach. I undertake a close reading of Paula Delgado-Kling's online literary reportage »Child Soldiers: Homero« and Mark Bowden's multi-media text »The Desert One Debacle«. Their online literary reportages serve as case studies to illustrate how literary techniques and strategies used by New Journalists in the past were taken in new directions in the wake of the rise of the Internet and its unique electronic features. The text-immanent analysis of the two articles is complemented by material from my interviews with the two writers of narrative nonfiction. Both Delgado-Kling and Bowden are distinguished journalists who have specialized in the field of nonfiction and creative writing. My conversations with them bear testimony to the fact that it is time to revisit and reassess some of Habermas's ideas against the background of our fractioned, multifaceted information age.

At the heart of the works of New Journalists was essentially a reflection on broader cultural change. In an attempt to reconcile the conflicting worlds of journalism and literature, New Journalists like Norman Mailer, Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe were not only concerned with a an accurate and beautiful representation of reality, but they were also dedicated to guiding audiences toward democratic possibilities. Given that New Journalists were heavily criticized by traditional media for injecting their own point of view in an article and thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, their work can be seen as challenging Habermas's view regarding the dichotomy between ethics and aesthetics. Rather than drawing a demarcation line between private and public self, New Journalists demonstrate that such boundaries need to be seen as fluid, permeable and always contested. Their aesthetic convictions, in Bakhtinian terms,[5] take shape in the form of an intertext, that is, a sort of ›intertextual‹ web of cultural meaning production that calls on the audience to reflect on social reality and media production. Following Bakhtin, online literary reportages represent cultural texts and practices which are, by nature, intertextual and dialogical insofar as »any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances« with which »it enters into one kind of relation or another.«[6] While New Journalists' emphases on the subtleties of language, creativity and a focus on writing practices stand in stark contrast to the Habermasian evaluation of popular mass media and his rather rigid view of language, authors belonging to the second generation of New Journalists – such as Paula Delgado-Kling whose writing has been nominated for the Simon Bolivar Award, Colombia's top journalism award, and Mark Bowden, award-winning American writer and journalist – contribute significantly to the proliferation of popular media and its increasing encroachment in lived culture. By publishing their literary reportages online they embed them in an ever-changing electronic environment. Consequently, online literary reportages become landmarks of the intertextual system that New Journalists used to spell out and according to which readers and texts become partners in the interpretative process.

---

5 | See Mikhail M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin.* Austin/TX 1994.

6 | Mikhail M. Bakhtin: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* Austin/TX 1986, p. 69.

This discussion investigates how literary journalists that publish online make use of fictive techniques nowadays that have been employed by New Journalists in the past in order to create authenticity in their articles. Furthermore, it takes into account that the Internet has become a prominent platform for the publication of journalistic texts, and more precisely, literary reportages. New Journalism was originally conceived as a literary endeavor which relies fundamentally on the writer's subjectivity, seeking to decrease the distance between subject and object.[7]

> The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters.[8]

Wolfe contended that New Journalism was soon to rule out the realistic novel in literary significance. Although his ambitious hypothesis did not quite come true, the techniques used by New Journalists left their mark on contemporary journalism.

According to Jack Fuller, many of the literary techniques first used by New Journalists can now be found across print journalism in newspapers and magazine features.[9] In a similar vein, Doug Underwood notes that in order to transcend the traditional limitations of conventional journalism, today's journalists resort to perspectives and techniques from New Journalism.[10] Wolfe identifies certain techniques as central to the success of New Journalism: scene-by-scene construction, a record of the dialogue in full length, third-person narration and the use of symbolic details.[11] Moreover, Norman Sims notes that immersion, voice, accuracy and symbolism are core elements of New Journalists' writing.[12] These techniques originating from debates initiated almost half a century ago have been absorbed into today's narrative journalism, so that issues of objectivity and facticity haunt contemporary practitioners, so-called ›New New Journalists‹, to an even greater degree than their forerunners who did not have the added dimension of the electronic medium which further complicates the notion of authenticity in narrative journalism.[13]

Whereas Sandra Borden embraces new writing techniques believing that conventional third-person reporting may actually hurt a journalist's credibility because it makes the journalist appear less authentic and honest, [14] Fuller points out that »[w]hen journalism adopts storytelling techniques from fiction it takes on some ambiguities, too, which make it difficult to fulfill the basic requirements for journalistic discipline.«[15] Fuller's claim

---

7 | See John Hartsock: *A History of American Literary Journalism.* Amherst 2000.

8 | Tom Wolfe: *The New Journalism* (ref. 1), p. 21.

9 | See Jack Fuller: *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age.* Chicago 1996. See also Berrin Beasley: »Journalists' Attitudes Toward Narrative Writing«. In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 19.1 (1998), p. 78–89; Robert Lewis Donohew: »Newswriting Style: What Arouses the Reader?« In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 3.2 (1982), p. 3–6.

10 | See Doug Underwood: *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000.* Cambridge/UK 2008.

11 | These characteristics overlap with what Lounsberry identifies as literary journalism. See Barbara Lounsberry: *The Art of Fact. Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction.* New York 1990.

12 | See Norman Sims (ed.): *The Literary Journalists.* New York 1984. See also Isabel Soares: »*South*: Where Travel Meets Literary Journalism«. In: *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.1 (2009), p. 17–30.

13 | See Robert Boynton (ed.): *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft.* New York 2005.

14 | See Sandra Borden: *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press.* Aldershot 2007.

15 | Fuller: *News Values* (ref. 9), p. 157.

has been given new impetus ever since the Internet has been identified as a vehicle for the proliferation of literary reportages.[16] The specific electronic properties of cyberspace, that is, hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity, not only allow for new narrative possibilities but also offer enhanced means of immersion for the reader.[17] Similar to the process of immersion, dramatic devices employed by New Journalists almost half a century ago are being transformed into participatory activities on the Internet. Moreover, the features of the Internet allow for new forms of multiperspectival narration. Taken together electronic properties can lead to an increase in authenticity and credibility for online narrative journalism. Thus, for ›New New Journalists‹ cyberspace functions as a »powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence.«[18]

The hermeneutic analysis of cyber-narratives has thus far produced relatively little theoretical grounding, although if combined with a postmodernist approach that no longer recognizes the distinction between popular and high culture, it can provide fundamental insights into the understanding of online literary reportages. A deconstructive analysis of popular media, on the other hand, in the form of an interpretative reading is conducive to both cultural reflexivity and media literacy. According to Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens, one of the reasons for the reluctance toward systematic theorization has to do with »the basic conviction that critical attention […] is not appropriate to works belonging to a medium which has as one of its primary principles the absence of – literally – fixed shapes and – literally – fixed meanings.«[19] The French semiotician Jacques Fontanille, however, repudiates this criticism. He argues that if electronic texts are read slowly, they provide a good basis for a thorough structural analysis. In my critical analysis I will make use of the close reading method in order to develop what Fontanille describes as a dialogue with the structure, form and meaning of the electronic text.[20]

In conventional journalism, the notion of authenticity is intrinsically bound to a reporter's commitment to factuality and objectivity, which Michael Schudson identifies both as an occupational norm and a moral ideal.[21] Matthew Kieran defines his concept of objectivity and truth as follows:

> In journalism, as distinct from fiction, there is a truth of the matter and this is what objectivity in journalism aims at […]. Where reporting turns away from the goal of truth […], the justification and self-confessed rationale of journalism threatens to disappear.[22]

---

16 | See Norman Sims: »The Problem and the Promises of Literary Journalism Studies«. In: *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.1 (2009), p. 7–16.

17 | For a detailed discussion see Marie-Laure Ryan: *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore 2001. See also Janet Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York 1997.

18 | Pierre Lévy: *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?* [Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age?]. Paris 1995, p. 16.

19 | Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens (eds.): *Close Reading New Media: Analyzing Electronic Literature*. Leuven 2003, p. 7. Ryan notes that it is precisely the transition to the electronic medium that is of importance to literary scholars, because »it [the electronic movement; N.B.] problematizes familiar notions, and it challenges the limits of language«. Ryan: *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (ref. 17), p. 10.

20 | See Jacques Fontanille: »Préface«. In: Alain Vuillemin and Michel Lenoble (eds.): *Littérature, Informatique, Lecture. De la lecture assistée par ordinateur à la lecture interactive*. Limoges 1999, p. 1–8.

21 | See Schudson: »The Objectivity Norm« (ref. 2), p. 149.

22 | Matthew Kieran: »Objectivity, Impartiality and Good Journalism«. In: Matthew Kieran (ed.): *Media Ethics*. London 1998, p. 34.

According to Tony Harcup, fundamental pillars of truth and objectivity rest on the journalists' responsibility to 1) look at both sides of a story, 2) assess conflicting claims, 3) assess the credibility of sources, 4) look for evidence and 5) not publish anything believed to be untrue.[23] Apart from the objectivity ideal, however, Borden notes that »a reporter wishes to have an *authentic* voice.«[24] Moreover, if we see this issue through the lens of a postmodernist paradigm, authenticity is – similar to objectivity – relational and eventually depends on the eye of the beholder (i.e., the reader). According to Gaye Tuchman, objectivity is a strategic ritual that journalists use in defending their work.[25] In this sense, news is not an accurate reflection of reality; rather it is an individual interpretation of reality shaped by a journalist's personal beliefs. Following this line of argument, it becomes clear why proponents of narrative journalism argued that there is no such thing as truth / objectivity in reporting. Narrative journalism exemplifies this at its best in the sense that its goal is to depict a different version of reality.

In this article authenticity is defined as a feeling of truth that can be achieved through various journalistic principles *and* fictive techniques as I will show in my two case studies. My argument thus builds on Margreth Lünenborg's conceptualization of authenticity as a characteristic that is encoded in the process of production with the help of aesthetic devices and that has to be decoded by the reader in the process of consumption.[26] In other words, the meaning of the online reportage is a result of the interplay between production and consumption as Mark Bowden, the author of »The Desert One Debacle«, alludes to in my interview with him. He says that when his story was published on the Internet it did not become more authentic *per se,* but Bowden proposed that in the online environment it is »more verifiably authentic.«[27] This means that the reader detects the authenticity of the story in the process of consumption by digesting all the source material posted online. Similarly, for Paula Delgado-Kling, author of the literary reportage »Child Soldiers: Homero«, authenticity is something that has to do with the reader's perception and reception of the characters and locations described in her story. In an online interview that I arranged with her, Delgado-Kling puts it like this: »Authenticity is the essence of a place or character.«[28] The author's statement is interesting insofar as it shows that the debate about authenticity discloses where journalism and literature intersect. Fuller writes, »Fiction is – like journalism – a way of discovering truth.«[29] Or in Delgado-Kling's words: »For me, [writing ›Child Soldiers: Homero‹] was a journey of discovery, to uncover for myself what is happening in Colombia, in my country.«[30]

Hence, authenticity for Delgado-Kling is not least a personal expression of journalistic autonomy. By making use of different (fictive) techniques in order to heighten interest and authenticity literary journalists that publish online once again stir a scholarly debate about the dilemma between fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, that although it has its origins in the tradition of New Journalism is nonetheless of a different nature since the framework of production, distribution and reception has undergone

---

23 | Tony Harcup: *Journalism: Principles and Practice.* London 2004.

24 | Borden: *Journalism as Practice* (ref. 14), p. 37 [emphasis added; N.B.].

25 | See Gaye Tuchman: *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality.* New York 1978.

26 | See Margreth Lünenborg: *Journalismus als kultureller Prozess. Zur Bedeutung von Journalismus in der Mediengesellschaft. Ein Entwurf.* Wiesbaden 2005.

27 | Mark Bowden: Interview by Nora Berning, 24 September 2009.

28 | Paula Delgado-Kling: Interview by Nora Berning, 16 September 2009.

29 | Fuller: *News Values* (ref. 9), p. 161.

30 | Delgado-Kling: Interview (ref. 28).

considerable changes. However, some of the criticisms that Ronald Weber and Dwight Macdonald target at the first generation of narrative writers continue to be relevant in the age of online narrative writing.[31] Both Weber and Macdonald argue that literary journalism problematizes the writer-reader-contract, that is, a kind of ethical contract that exists between journalists and their readers. Due to the fact that New Journalists as well as the new generation of writers tend to maintain a close relationship to their subjects, they run the risk of losing track of objectivity. Critics like Herbert Gold have described this inadequate imbalance as »epidemic first personism«. The disruption of the traditional relationship between writers and their sources becomes precarious »when there's not enough world and too much self.«[32] Despite the fact that with the push for professional objectivity conventional journalists have generally abandoned first-person reporting, some traces of the ›epidemic‹ can still be found in contemporary narrative journalism, both online and offline.[33] For literary journalists such as Delgado-Kling this technique serves as yet another way to structure reality, one that elucidates the bigger picture. Reflexive passages written in the first person that function as a sort of meta-narrative turn Delgado-Kling's reportage into »a *story* about reality, not reality itself.«[34] Strictly speaking, she disregards the journalistic convention of third-person reporting and gives up part of the distance that she is supposed to have as a reporter. Delgado-Kling declared in our interview that she brings her own ideology into what she writes.

In order to unravel the ideological undercurrents of both Delgado-Kling's online literary reportage »Child Soldiers: Homero« and Bowden's multimedia text »The Desert One Debacle«, the structuralist approach to my textual analysis will be supplemented by an underlying deconstructivist cultural studies paradigm. It is grounded in a conceptualization of journalism as a narrative that represents culture. The interpretation of (journalistic) texts is also a practice of cultural analysis that focuses on ›cultural meaning making‹. Language in literary journalism is especially central to the construction of meaning as symbolic configurations of culture. Literary reportages carry cultural values and meanings and thus function as a sort of ›culture grammar‹.[35] Moreover, my research takes into account that narrativity and the construction of meaning are subject to the negotiation of the text by readers. Online literary reportages are defined by their context and embedded in both a ›culture grammar‹ and a ›narrative grammar‹. The disclosure of these grammars enables readers to derive meaning from the reportage and to give meaning to it. The plurality of meanings that such close readings lay bare are alluded to by Barthes when he says that a text is always a »galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared as the main one.«[36]

---

31 | See Ronald Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*. New York 1974; Dwight Macdonald: »Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe and His Magic Writing Machine«. In: Ronald Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist*, p. 223–233.

32 | Herbert Gold: »On Epidemic First Personism«. In: Ronald Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist*, (ref. 31) p. 286.

33 | See Fuller: *News Values* (ref. 9), p. 131–166.

34 | Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne: »Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News«. In: Daniel Berkowitz (ed.): *Social Meanings of News*. London 1997, p. 346 [emphasis added; N.B.].

35 | See *ibid.*, p. 341.

36 | Roland Barthes: *S/Z: An Essay*. New York 1974, p. 6.

This reasoning resonates with »Child Soldiers: Homero« that was written out of desire to provide many entry points for the readers and to engage them both intellectually and emotionally. The reportage was published in the winter 2008 issue of the online literary magazine *Narrative.* It tells the story of the child soldier Homero in Colombia who has been abducted by members of the FARC.[37] It describes thirty-six hours of Homero's life in a military camp where he gets to know the child combatant Elsa who dies in a battle against the army on the second day of his military training.

Like many New Journalists, Delgado-Kling followed her subjects around for a long time in order to give an authentic account of what is happening in Colombia. Delgado-Kling says she wanted to understand it on her own terms, through her own analysis.[38] This kind of »inside-the-skin reporting« that the author makes use of was also a prominent technique of New Journalists.[39] It allows the reporter to portray the subject with psychological depth. Delgado-Kling immersed herself in the environment over a period of four years: »I was exhausted from coming here every day.«[40] In her reportage, she inserts reflexive passages in which she renders information about her past in Colombia. These passages convey background information and at the same time increase credibility. In addition to saturation reporting, Delgado-Kling makes use of Wolfe's dramatic devices: scene-by-scene construction, extended dialogue, third-person narration and symbols. These techniques not only heighten the dramatic impact of the story but enable the reader to experience the emotional reality of the scene. The reader becomes an eyewitness to the action, and it is through this emotional involvement that the story obtains credibility.

Delgado-Kling's reportage is told in twelve chapters with every chapter forming its own scene or what a cinematographer would call a close-up shot. Already in the opening scene, Delgado-Kling makes use of dramatic devices. The story begins *in medias res* in order to compel the reader immediately. Throughout the whole reportage, Delgado-Kling employs time-lapses to convey immediacy and authenticity.

> The night Homero was abducted, he'd been exhausted from the jeep drive, then from all the walking, and from the grief of being removed from his mother. At the *cambuche* he fell asleep right away. On his second night away from home, Homero woke every few hours, chilled by his perspiration.[41]

Homero's story evokes images of war films that culminate in a cathartic experience for the war hero: here, Homero's witnessing of Elsa's death. This scene is embedded in a longer summary section in which Delgado-Kling employs flashbacks. The summary method allows the author to telescope time, to bind scenes and to build suspense. Delgado-Kling inserts a lot of biographic details about Homero and thus establishes a comprehensive personality profile. She also contextualizes the events and adds complexity to the story.

---

37 | The FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* / The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is a left-wing guerilla organization that was founded in the 1960s. Throughout the history of the movement's armed struggle against the Colombian government and innocent civilians, the FARC has constantly recruited children as soldiers and informants.

38 | See Delgado-Kling: Interview (ref. 28).

39 | See Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist* (ref. 31), p. 16.

40 | Paula Delgado-Kling: »Child Soldiers: Homero«. In: *Narrative*, Winter 2008. http://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/paula-delgado-kling (retrieved April 5, 2009), p. 9.

41 | Delgado-Kling: »Child Soldiers« (ref. 40), p. 1.

With the use of extended dialogue, New Journalists tried to capture human inter-action in order to convey authenticity. Moreover, dialogue helped them to establish and define character and setting. Delgado-Kling makes use of this technique, together with colloquial speech patterns and foreign-language words. This not only adds variety to the page, but enables the author to convey an authentic image of the life of the child soldiers. For instance, the reader becomes an eye- as well as ear-witness of the daily routine in the camp since Delgado-Kling uses photographs that show boy soldiers making gas cylinder bombs. The image illustrates what is central to the dialogic sequences:

> »Today we're learning how to make homemade gas cylinder bombs,« Comandante Marta said. Homero yawned, then licked his lips, like a panther cub. »It's a simple procedure,« she said. »We use a gas tank normally used in a household stove. First, empty the gas out of the tank. Next, fill it with metal. All types of metals – nails, wrenches, pieces of iron.« »I've heard we also fill the cylinder with shit,« a boy said. He made the others laugh. »*Con mierda.*«[42]

Another textual device that is frequently used in online literary reportages is the leitmotif. One example of the leitmotif that is central to Delgado-Kling's online reportage is the discourse on truth reflected in the name of the female child soldier Elsa, which literally means truth. Furthermore, the name of the male protagonist, Homero, alludes to the Greek epic poet Homer and recalls the hero cult associated with him. Another way of using the leitmotif as a stylistic device in the reportage crystallizes in Delgado-Kling's predilection for mimicry. More precisely, the author uses the word ›imitate‹ several times in the story in order to create what Barthes has called »effect of reality«, that is, a stylistic device that serves to convey the realism of a text.[43] For instance, Homero imitates the brutal reality of war in a sort of role play:

> Then a drunk homeless man walked by, and Homero imitated him exactly. »You have good spirit, Homero,« I said. I always thought that, even after he told me he had lost count of how many people he killed when he was in the FARC.[44]

Based on the assumption that literary journalism represents the intersection of journalism and literature, the authorial voice can be considered one of its most important elements. According to Wolfe, the finest pieces of New Journalism were written in the third person. Third-person narration enables the author to present every scene through the eyes of a particular subject.[45] In her literary reportage, Delgado-Kling uses two distinct voices that intersect throughout the whole story. The third-person narrator that she uses to describe Homero's perspective gives the reader the feeling of being inside Homero's mind. This omniscient narrator parallels the first-person narrator who allows the author to reflect on her role as a reporter within the process of writing. It is through the lens of Homero's horrific experiences that Delgado-Kling relives both his and her personal story – a story about lost identities and the search for home.

---

42 | *Ibid.*

43 | See Roland Barthes: »Effet de réel«. In: Roland Barthes: *Littérature et réalité*. Paris 1982, p. 81–90.

44 | Delgado-Kling: »Child Soldiers« (ref. 40), p. 8.

45 | In order to represent a person's thoughts and feelings, New Journalists interviewed people about their emotions and asked them what they felt at a certain moment in time. For instance, Gay Talese who became famous for his extensive use of interior monologue said that this technique allowed him to maintain his own writing style and enabled him at the same time to capture more accurately what a person was telling him. See Gay Talese: »The Book as a Medium for Journalism«. In: Charles Flippen: *Liberating the Media. The New Journalism*. Washington 1974, p. 42–49.

> I liked him [Homero]. He liked me too, but a question nagged at me: By showering him with attention, had I made him *like* me? I had just wanted to be thorough in my note-taking. I was afraid of fact-checkers telling me my notes were not reliable enough.[46]

The third- and first-person narrators complement one another, resulting in a multi-perspectival narrative. Moreover, as the following example shows, the two perspectives reinforce each other, strengthen the story's internal logic and exhibit verisimilitude.

> When Homero was telling me about Commander Marta, he emphasized that she was from the southwestern city of Pasto and spoke like a Pastusa. Throughout Colombia, when we say some-one is Pastusa, we mean she is slow. Homero's comment summoned popular Pastusa jokes. Homero asked: »You know the one about Colgate?« *Col-gá-té* translates as ›dangle yourself.‹ »There was this woman,« Homero said, »and she saw a billboard on the side of the highway, it was for Dangle Yourself toothpaste.« »*Sí, sí,* I know it,« I played on. »So, your Commander Marta, she jumped up, grabbed the billboard, and dangled herself from it.« »Yep, and then, she saw another billboard for *Nivea* cream.« *Ní-vea,* or ›don't dare see it.' »I've heard that one, too,« I said. She covered her eyes because of the billboard for Don't Dare See It Cream, and she fell off the one that said Dangle Yourself. Dude, I've heard those before, and they are bad!«[47]

Spurred by creative, alternative approaches to online reportage writing, Delgado-Kling capitalizes on techniques of New Journalism in order to create authenticity. The assumption that these techniques reinforce an affective approach to the reportage, as opposed to a more analytical or critical one, brings me back to the writer-reader contract. While it could be argued that by pushing the boundaries between fact and fiction, literary journal-ists can draw readers in more easily, it is my belief that along with the *mélange* of fictive and journalistic techniques a number of problems come to the fore as regards the reception of online literary reportages. For instance, if narrative strategies are not employed carefully and meaningfully in a text, literary journalists may run the risk of perpetuating the current trend toward personalization in such a way that readers are denied access to the complex-ities of global issues. In an online environment such a trend is reinforced by the use of im-ages and photographs that speak to the reader's emotions rather than intellect. Moreover, by using literary techniques, journalists are likely to stray into fiction proper. In order to re-main credible, however, it is important for literary journalists, in general, and for those who publish online, in particular, to be open about their methods and reporting techniques. By publishing official documents or extracts of reports, letters and diaries along with their arti-cles, for instance, narrative journalists could establish something similar to Tuchman's »web of facticity« in the sense that supplementary texts would »present themselves as both indi-vidually and collectively self-validating« and function as »cross-referents to one another.«[48] However, another potential danger involves the authorial role in narrative journalism as compared to conventional journalism. Whereas traditional journalists seek to offer solu-tions to what Fuller describes as »the richness of ambiguity« and employ certain practi-ces in order to do so, narrative journalists are often less concerned about resolving these ambiguities.[49] In an extreme case, the articles might reveal even more about the authors themselves than about their subjects. In the case of Delgado-Kling, one could argue that her writing about Colombia is almost like a therapy with which she tries to heal the wounds of her childhood. »It was my way to process this war in my mind and my emotions.«[50]

---

46 | Delgado-Kling: »Child Soldiers« (ref. 40), p. 10 [italics in the original].
47 | *Ibid*.
48 | Tuchman: *Making News* (ref. 25), p. 86.
49 | See Fuller: *News Values* (ref. 9), p. 164.
50 | Delgado-Kling: Interview (ref. 28).

According to Delgado-Kling more photographs, maps and links to reports about the FARC would have added authenticity to her story. The desiderata can be seen as possible avenues for online narrative journalism. Mark Bowden recognized this early on. In my interview with him, the *Atlantic Monthly* national correspondent underlines that the Internet gives the reader the opportunity to arrive at a higher level of involvement. The following discussion of Bowden's online literary reportage »The Desert One Debacle«,[51] published in 2006, takes a closer look at the internal features of his writing and considers the mechanisms by which his reportage operates. His article about the Iranian hostage crisis retraces the events between the 11th and the 24th of April, 1980 (the day of the rescue operation). Prior to writing this reportage, Bowden travelled to Iran to conduct several interviews. He has gathered material about the crisis since 2001.

In the course of its publication, the original article in the paperback edition of *The Atlantic* was transformed into a multimedia text for the Internet. In the digital version of his article, Bowden makes extensive use of hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity. In the eyes of the author, one of the consequences of this is that the reader becomes a co-author of the text. In other words, the means of immersion for the reader are increased. Bowden's use of hypertextuality allows for nonlinear storytelling and thus enhances the New Journalism technique of scene-by-scene construction. Hypertextuality opens up possibilities for segmentation, juxtaposition and connectedness. It also facilitates the exploitation of temporality. Hence, dramatic devices such as flashbacks and foreshadowing acquire a new dimension on the Internet.

However, by linking his site to other articles and reports about Iran, Bowden does not automatically increase the authenticity and, by implication, credibility of his reportage. On the contrary, one could argue that hypertextuality fosters fragmentation and ultimately leads to the disintegration of journalistic texts. In the worst of cases, nonlinear storytelling might contribute to the loss of meaning and cultural embeddedness. Only if employed carefully can multimediality contribute to a heightened level of authenticity in online literary reportages. By using audio elements (interviews, video clips, podcasts), graphics (maps, photos) and official documents that can be downloaded directly from the site, Bowden utilizes the possibilities at hand in order to increase the credibility of the story. Similar to his Internet site »Blackhawk Down«,[52] Bowden's reportage creates a complex multimedia text.

Clearly, »The Desert One Debacle« is designed to appeal to a broad audience. It is a *prima facie* example of how the configurations of popular narrative media allow readers to intervene and participate in the storytelling process. In this respect, the »Blackhawk Down« web site is a crucial resource through which readers can retain a degree of autonomy from »the tyranny of the author.«[53] The appropriation of the text takes place according to the reader's own discursive rules. The text itself becomes a structural component for the formation of cultural capital which eventually translates into a critical perspective on culture.[54] However, the attention span of readers is oftentimes too short to grasp the

---

51 | Mark Bowden: »The Desert One Debacle«. In: *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2006. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/4803/ (retrieved 5 September 2009).

52 | The web site presents a digital version of the original newspaper series about the failed U.S. relief mission in Somalia that was first run under the same title in the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1997.

53 | Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (ref. 17), p. 133.

54 | See Pierre Bourdieu: *Sociology in Question*. London 1993.

nuances of the text. If they let themselves get carried away by the electronic features, they are likely to succumb to the Internet's ideology of randomness. In fact, there is reason to believe that hypertextuality extenuates the information function of news and, instead, supports this ideology.[55] John Corner argues that such narrative approaches foster over-simplification and create an artificial hierarchy of discourses which is naturalized through the dominant perspective of multimedia story-telling.[56] The electronic properties have unintended consequences and convey a message that stands in stark contrast to what Bowden exposes in his writing. For instance, the author deconstructs and criticizes the notion of American heroism and the ideology behind it. The multimedia elements, how-ever, evoke the image of the American soldier as a hero, ignoring the disastrous course of events denounced in the story. Hence, instead of increasing the credibility and authenti-city of a literary reportage, the features of the Internet can have a distorting effect.

Bowden acknowledged this problem in our interview. He says that »no matter how much material you post on the Internet to support the text, the narrative piece remains a creative work that should be recognized as such and appreciated by the readers for its narrative quality.«[57] True to the motto ›*Je narre donc je suis*‹ [I narrate, therefore I am], both Bowden and Paula Delgado-Kling see reportage writing primarily as a creative act that results in a work of art. Although »[t]he ways to enhance the piece do not neces-sarily add to its literary quality,«[58] electronic features make it possible to engage read-ers more comprehensively. They set in motion the circulation of opinion and offer the conditions in which interactive, popular narrative media can come into being in the first place. Bowden's reportage exemplifies how the electronic features promote horizontal communication between a dispersed public that is interconnected through the electronic medium. Besides multimedia elements, Bowden makes use of interactive features such as feedback forums, discussion groups and chats in order to enhance the multiperspec-tival nature of the story. For instance, his reportage is linked to a blog on Iranian politics. Together with the dynamic display of the online reportage, Bowden's site demonstrates how the techniques of New Journalists are applied nowadays on the Internet and turned into a catalyst of postmodern forms of communication.

Most strikingly of all, the web site reflects broader changes and transitions in journal-ism culture which are inextricably linked to the modulations of various forms of mass communication. Through the lens of a postmodernist paradigm, the public sphere be-comes an arena, a forum where people, although physically distant, can jointly deliberate upon issues and develop attitudes that constitute public opinion. What makes this pro-cess interesting is that the more perspectives the reporter includes in the narrative, the more versions of the truth circulate among the readers who eventually construct their own story. The question then is not which version is the most authentic but whether the different versions taken together ultimately represent a surplus to conventional narrative journalism in the many paperback editions of literary magazines.

Both case studies provide evidence for the fact that it is important to stretch Haber-mas's concept of the public sphere so as to make it fit for the digital information age, even though in his later work Habermas himself describes the public sphere more loosely, due to the gradual blending of popular and elite culture. However, in Bowden's case we

---

55 | See Helen Fulton: »Print News as Narrative«. In: Helen Fulton, Rosemary Huisman, Julian Murphet and Anne Dunn (eds.): *Narrative and Media*. Cambridge/UK 2005, p. 218–244.

56 | See John Corner: *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*. Oxford 1999.

57 | Bowden: Interview (ref. 27).

58 | Delgado-Kling: Interview (ref. 28).

see that a broader, more flexible definition of the public sphere comprises the following shortcomings: First of all, electronic features are part of an affective approach to news media. This approach undermines logical discussion and deadens analytical and critical thinking skills essential to effective learning and productive living. Secondly, audiovisual elements might distract the reader's attention from the written word and can even change the meaning of a text. Thirdly, hypertextuality enforces a disordered and disjointed reading experience. Lastly, instead of embracing a neutral observer role, literary journalists tend to inscribe themselves in the text and, at times, introduce a narrative *alter ego*. If these techniques go so far that reporters jettison the objectivity axiom, an exchange and critique of validity claims become impossible.[59]

Still, narrative journalism on the Internet enables readers to immerse themselves in a world of abundant narrative possibilities. Thus, the Internet offers new means of expression for contemporary narrative journalists. By turning techniques of New Journalists into participatory activities, the focus shifts from the author / journalist to the reader. »The postmodern hypertext tradition celebrates the indeterminate text as […] an affirmation of the reader's freedom of interpretation.«[60] In other words, the journalistic text becomes subject to the negotiation of meaning on the part of the reader. In recent years Internet platforms such as *granta.com*, *slate.com* and *salon.com* have published high-quality literary reportages (with some relying more on the features of the Internet than others). Given the huge diversity of online platforms, entire sites dedicated to compiling examples of online journalistic storytelling have emerged. This development seems to counter what Habermas refers to as one of the major shortcomings of the Internet, its lack of focus.[61]

In light of this discussion, there are several areas which need further questioning. Habermas's criticism would be that online narrative journalism is still just another form of infotainment that contributes to the »refeudalisation« of the public sphere.[62] The question remains whether ›New New Journalists‹ can harness the techniques of their forerunners in order to enrich the factual style of news reporting without violating its basic principles of truth and objectivity. Furthermore, do the features made available by the Internet really increase the authenticity of online literary reportage? Is there a demand for this kind of online reporting or does the potential for fragmentation and disintegration threaten its viability? Bowden claims that one of the main problems associated with narrative journalism on the Internet is a general lack of interest. He adds, »The readers often do not have the time to read through all the material and watch the movies and interviews posted online. And their attention span is generally very short.«[63] Moreover, the creation of online literary reportages like Bowden's is a costly endeavor, which makes it necessary to develop efficient business models for (narrative) journalism on the Internet.

Online literary reportages represent an imperative counterweight to conventional journalism that is essential both for our emotional and intellectual survival. As part of

---

59 | See Lincoln Dahlberg: »Computer-Mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis«. In: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7.1 (2001): http://jcmc. indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html (retrieved 25 April 2010).

60 | Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (ref. 17), p. 133.

61 | See Jürgen Habermas: »Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research«. In: *Communication Theory* 16.4 (2006), p. 411–426.

62 | See Habermas: »The Public Sphere« (ref. 3), p. 403.

63 | Bowden: Interview (ref. 27).

the panoply of human communications, literary reportages on the Internet will, in the long term, serve as a fruitful alternative to tell stories in a captivating way. What sets online literary reportages apart from literary journalism in print is that the journalist who performs the double role of communicator and narrator can give shape to the information in a way that the print version does not allow. Mark Bowden says of this contrast,

> I think the online presentation is a lot richer than the written text. The reader … well, we should probably say the reader / the viewer / the listener can delve as deeply into the material as he wishes. […] On the Internet, the writer can provide a new service to the readers. They can make sense of the writer's material themselves, digest the sources, and draw their own conclusions.[64]

Online narrative journalism exists as a semi-autonomous journalistic field that relies heavily on language to create meaning and authenticity. Given the strong emphasis on language and the extensive use of fictive techniques, I conclude that even though journalism and fiction / literature should remain separate they nonetheless enrich each another in many ways, considering that the literary element is one of journalism's fundamental cultural building blocks.[65] The re-conceptualization of journalism in the information age incorporates ›New New Journalism‹ as one of its moments. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that people develop digital literacy skills and learn to critically evaluate and reflect on the flood of images, sounds and texts in today's information society. The two cases here provide a starting point for a discussion of how online literary reportages can make a significant contribution to media literacy. Mark Bowden's reportage is a model for presenting journalistic content in an innovative way. Similar to Paula Delgado-Kling's reportage, his text is informed by dynamic models of real-world processes which enable the author to play with the reader's expectations. Both reportages are paragons of storytelling for the purpose of conveying human experience as intensely as possible.

However, in order to check on authenticity, accuracy, veracity and bias in online literary reportages and to follow the flow of information across multiple modalities, the public needs to develop, first of all, an awareness and understanding of the electronic features that continuously expand our mental capacities. According to Bowden, the future of journalism is online. Only if we equip people with a prolific framework for interpreting online literary reportages and for detecting patterns of meaning construction will a heightened level of cultural and media reflexivity be reached. This is what effective digital citizenship is all about. To put it differently, online storytelling matters. Literary reportages as the ones by Bowden and Delgado-King are not just a concomitant of the postmodern hypertext tradition but should be read as

> an open invitation to the readers by the author to imagine mutually in a possible world full of possible characters striving to get to their goals in such a way that constitutes a direct reflection of our own experiences as we might have moved, achieving our goals in a world which vehemently opposes and gives us much less than we truly desire.[66]

---

64 | *Ibid.*

65 | See Lünenborg: *Journalismus als kultureller Prozess* (ref. 26), p. 152–200.

66 | Payel Chatterjee: *Cognitive Narratology*. CognoBytes, 2009. http://cognobytes.com/int/notes-applied/57-cognitive-literary-theorization/134-cognitive-narratology?format=pdf (retrieved 25 April 2010).

Works Cited

BAKHTIN, Mikhail M.: *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin/TX 1994.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail M.: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin/TX 1986.

BARTHES, Roland: »Effet de réel«. In: Roland Barthes: *Littérature et réalité*. Paris 1982, p. 81–90.

BARTHES, Roland: *S/Z: An Essay*. New York 1974.

BEASLEY, Berrin: »Journalists' Attitudes Toward Narrative Writing«. In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 19.1 (1998), p. 78–89.

BIRD, Elizabeth and Robert Dardenne: »Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News«. In: Daniel Berkowitz (ed.): *Social Meanings of News*. London 1997, p. 333–350.

BORDEN, Sandra: *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press*. Aldershot 2007.

BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Sociology in Question*. London 1993.

BOWDEN, Mark: »Blackhawk Down«. In: *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1997. http://inquirer.philly.com/packages/somalia/sitemap.asp (retrieved 5 September 2009).

BOWDEN, Mark: »The Desert One Debacle«. In: *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2006. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/4803/ (retrieved 5 September 2009).

BOWDEN, Mark: Interview by Nora Berning, 24 September 2009.

BOYNTON, Robert (ed.): *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft*. New York 2005.

CAREY, James W.: »Where Journalism Education Went Wrong«. Paper presented to Journalism Education, the First Amendment Imperative, and the Changing Media Marketplace, held at Middle Tennessee University, 1996.

CHATTERJEE, Payel: *Cognitive Narratology*. CognoBytes, 2009. http://cognobytes.com/int/notes-applied/57-cognitive-literary-theorization/134-cognitive-narratology?format=pdf (retrieved 25 April 2010).

CORNER, John: *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*. Oxford 1999.

DAHLBERG, Lincoln: »Computer-Mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis«. In: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7.1 (2001): http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html (retrieved 25 April 2010).

DELGADO-KLING, Paula: »Child Soldiers: Homero«. In: *Narrative*, 2008. http://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/paula-delgado-kling (retrieved 5 April 2009).

DELGADO-KLING, Paula: Interview by Nora Berning, 16 September 2009.

DONOHEW, Robert Lewis: »Newswriting Style: What Arouses the Reader?« In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 3.2 (1982), p. 3–6.

ERICSON, Richard, Patricia M. Baranek and Janet B. L. Chan: *Negotiating Control*. Toronto 1989.

FONTANILLE, Jacques: »Préface«. In: Alain Vuillemin and Michel Lenoble (eds.): *Littérature, Informatique, Lecture. De la lecture assistée par ordinateur à la lecture interactive*. Limoges 1999, p. 1–8.

FULLER, Jack: *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age*. Chicago 1996.

FULTON, Helen: »Print News as Narrative«. In: Helen Fulton, Rosemary Huisman, Julian Murphet and Anne Dunn (eds.): *Narrative and Media*. Cambridge/UK 2005, p. 218–244.

GOLD, Herbert: »On Epidemic First Personism«. In: Ronald Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*. New York 1974, p. 283–293.

HABERMAS, Jürgen: »Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research«. In: *Communication Theory* 16.4 (2006), p. 411–426.

HABERMAS, Jürgen: »The Public Sphere«. In: Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (eds.): *Rethinking Popular Culture–Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*. Berkeley/CA 1991, p. 398–404.

Habermas, Jürgen: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit]. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge/MA 1991.

Harcup, Tony: *Journalism: Principles and Practice.* London 2004.

Hartsock, John: *A History of American Literary Journalism.* Amherst 2000.

Hellmann, John: *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction.* Chicago 1981.

Kieran, Matthew: »Objectivity, Impartiality and Good Journalism«. In: Matthew Kieran (ed.): *Media Ethics.* London 1998, p. 23–36.

Lévy, Pierre: *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?* [Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age?] Paris 1995.

Lounsberry, Barbara: *The Art of Fact. Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction.* New York 1990.

Lünenborg, Margreth: *Journalismus als kultureller Prozess. Zur Bedeutung von Journalismus in der Mediengesellschaft. Ein Entwurf.* Wiesbaden 2005.

Macdonald, Dwight: »Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe and His Magic Writing Machine«. In: Ronald Weber (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy.* New York 1974, p. 223–233.

Murray, Janet: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* New York 1997.

Ryan, Marie-Laure: *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media.* Baltimore 2001.

Schudson, Michael: »The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism«. In: *Journalism* 2.2 (2001), p. 149–170.

Sims, Norman (ed.): *The Literary Journalists.* New York 1984.

Sims, Norman: »The Problem and the Promises of Literary Journalism Studies«. In: *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.1 (2009), p. 7–16.

Soares, Isabel: »*South*: Where Travel Meets Literary Journalism«. In: *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.1 (2009), p. 17–30.

Talese, Gay: »The Book as a Medium for Journalism«. In: Charles Flippen: *Liberating the Media. The New Journalism.* Washington 1974, p. 42–49.

Tuchman, Gaye: *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality.* New York 1978.

Underwood, Doug: *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000.* Cambridge/UK 2008.

Van Looy, Jan and Jan Baetens (eds.): *Close Reading New Media: Analyzing Electronic Literature.* Leuven 2003.

Weber, Ronald (ed.): *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy.* New York 1974.

Wolfe, Tom: *The New Journalism.* New York 1973.