



COMPLEXITY: NO LONGER A COMMUNICATION BARRIER IN JOURNALISM? THE CASE OF NARRATIVE JOURNALISM

Marie Vanoost

F.R.S.-FNRS Research Fellow
Observatoire du récit médiatique
Université catholique de Louvain
marie.vanoost@uclouvain.be

Journalism schools and handbooks generally recommend writing short and simple sentences, using basic vocabulary and avoiding too long texts. This is supposed to ensure the readability of the news. But there are different styles and models in journalism. Among them is narrative journalism, which often offers longer articles, and advocates using literary writing devices and a more personal style. Several scholars consider, moreover, that it allows a deeper understanding of reality. Far from the principles emphasized in mainstream journalism, narrative journalism seems then to offer more complex texts conveying more complex messages. This paper will question this assumption. It will analyze four journalistic narratives, both from the United States and France. First it will quickly evaluate the complexity of their writing through some classic readability indicators. Then, focusing on elements reflecting certainty and uncertainty in the text, it will assess the complexity and indeterminacy of their content.

Introduction

A famous phrase states that journalists should “keep it short and simple.” Journalism schools and handbooks provide numerous recommendations to do so: “Complex sentences overloaded with long subordinate clauses should be avoided” (Keeble, 2005: 94), “Use short, simple words, phrases and sentences, don’t use two or more words when just one will do and avoid long words when a shorter one is available, however authoritative and intellectual the longer one might sound” (Pape & Featherstone, 2005: 27). Editors get the same kind of advice: “Make sure the lead paragraph comes across clearly in one reading.” “[g]o to the story sentence by sentence, clipping out unnecessary words, phrases and rambling quotes to keep the story at a manageable and readable length” (Martin, Cook & UPI, 2004: 286). Here appears the key word: “readable.” All these principles are supposed to ensure the readability of the news, thus optimizing its communication to readers. “Most people who read newspapers are in a hurry. They deserve clear writing in stories that get to the point in a straightforward way” (Martin, Cook & UPI, 2004: 282). Readability appears so important that it has even been translated into mathematical formulas, such as the famous Flesch Reading Ease Index. It led to controversies that this paper doesn’t intend to reopen (Redish, 2000; Schriver, 2000). What matters for the discussion is that journalism writing is still largely shaped by readability concerns, even if readability has also been put into perspective in journalism. Benoît Grevisse points out that its importance varies according to the genre: in factual genres, designed to provide the most important information to the reader, readability must be very high. “An editorial writer, a humor columnist or a literary critic can, on the contrary, count on stronger attention from his readers. Readability, though still pertinent for the global evaluation of the text, becomes less important than personal style or effect. This dosage requires nuance.” (2008: 19).

As Grevisse insists, there are different styles and forms in journalism. Among them is narrative journalism – sometimes called literary journalism, creative nonfiction, or even New New Journalism, the four terms being very close despite some nuances in their definition (Boynton, 2005; Gutkind, 2005; Sims, 2007). As we will see, narrative journalism advocates using literary writing devices and a more personal style. Several scholars also consider that it allows a deeper understanding of reality. Far from the principles emphasized in mainstream journalism, narrative journalism may seem to offer more complex texts carrying more complex messages. The aim of this paper is to question this assumption.

Definition And Questioning

Basically narrative journalism can be defined as “the genre that takes the techniques of fiction and applies them to nonfiction” (Nieman Foundation, 2013). For Jack Hart, it aims to produce a story that “would have a beginning, middle, and an end. Strong internal structure would regulate pace and create dramatic tension. Instead of sources, it would have characters. Instead of topic, it would have scenes. It would be scrupulously accurate, but it would reveal truths beyond the reach of an ordinary news report” (2011: 1).

It is both the form and the content of the article that change. The famous five W’s and H that usually guide journalists work are transformed: “Who” becomes character. “What” becomes plot. “Where” becomes setting. “When” becomes chronology. “Why” becomes motive. And “How” becomes narrative” (Clark, 2000). Fully developing these transformed five W’s and H seem to require more space. Take, for example, the “who.” “Persons, in the world of news-voice, are citizens, not characters. They have addresses, ages, arrest records, voting district and precinct locations, official hospital conditions, and military statuses. These are ‘civic traits.’ Narrative is about people doing stuff, and to some extent, and in the right places, must reach past civic traits if it is to cover real folks’ real stories well” (Kramer, quoted by Scanlan, 2011). As a consequence, narratives are often considered as a long form of journalism. Some stories are even split into several episodes.

But this doesn’t mean that the sentences and words become necessarily more elaborate. Describing the personal but “plain” style that literary journalists should strive for, Mark Kramer – who will later use the adjective narrative rather literary, proving the proximity between the two designations – writes: “The best language of literary journalists is also evocative, playful, sharpened by active verbs, sparing of abstract verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and the many indolent forms of ‘to be,’ taut in its grammatical linkages. Such uncluttered style is gracious – clear and pleasant in its own right, and suited for leading readers not merely to picture, but to feel events” (1995). This seems rather close to the conventional journalistic style. But Kramer also states that “Good, clean sentences are fundamental to a strong writer’s voice. Once you have achieved control over your sentences and paragraphs, you can torque a phrase into an unusual shape, offer a knowing side comment, leap forward and backward in time, digress from the main story line, and meander back to it” (Kramer & Call, 2007: 126). All these are literary writing techniques that clearly open unusual possibilities for complex writing in journalism.

More important, however, seems to be the complexity of the story itself. In the definition quoted earlier, Jack Hart consider that narrative journalism can “reveal truths beyond the reach of an ordinary news report” (2011: 1). According to several scholars, this kind of journalism is supposed to allow a deeper understanding of reality. For Clark, this is achieved through experience. He considers that defining narrative journalism through its writing techniques is interesting but insufficient. “[I]t’s also necessary to define what those tools are designed to create: I agree with those who say ‘experience.’ A narrative or story is a form of vicarious (or substitute) experience. The story transports the reader to a place and a time not otherwise available to the reader. We can problem climb another step up: What’s the purpose of such vicarious experience: maybe empathy, understanding, catharsis” (quoted by Scanlan, 2011).

Some go further. Kramer stresses that narrative journalism is not only a form of experience, but mixes experience and information: “If it is not an antidote to bewilderment, at least it unites daily experiences – including emotional ones – with the wild plenitude of information that can be applied to experience” (1995). This is why he considers that narrative journalism “unscrambles and sorts the messages of a complex world” (Kramer & Call, 2007: xv). As for John Hartsock, he defines literary journalism as resisting closure, confronting readers with an “inconclusive present that resonates with different possibilities of meaning” (2001: 75). Narrative journalism would then not only allow to render the world in a deeper and more nuanced manner, it would also let the reader decide, ultimately, how to interpret this complicated world.

Behind the definition of narrative journalism appears thus the assumption that it can offer more complex texts regarding both style and



content. This paper will question it through a double analysis of four journalistic narratives. First we will quickly evaluate their style, according to the readability recommendations offered in journalism handbooks. Then, focusing on elements reflecting “certainty” and “uncertainty” in the text, we will attempt to assess the complexity and indeterminacy of the narrative.

Methods and Procedures

This paper adopts a qualitative approach. It is a case study based on four articles taken from a larger corpus. This corpus includes texts from the United States, where it was first talked about narrative journalism, and texts from francophone European countries that are now experimenting with forms of narrative journalism, both in reference to the American model and to their long tradition of *grand reportage*. The corpus consists of articles written by journalists or published in media that claim to adhere to narrative journalism – or to the basic definition of narrative journalism. Moreover, among the production of each journalist or media, the selected articles have been designated as “particularly representative” of narrative journalism, either by their writer or by the editor.

As the analysis of the whole corpus is not yet finished – and because of the corpus's limits regarding representativity –, it is not possible to generalize the conclusions, or suggest a more frequent position toward complexity in narrative journalism. The aim here is only to question the assumption according to which narrative journalism offers both more complex form and content. It is thus not necessary to be able to describe the most common position toward complexity in narrative journalism, only to underline the diversity of the possible positions. As the analysis will show, four pieces are sufficient in this regard.

Among the four articles analyzed in this paper, two come from *The Tampa Bay Times* (ex-*St. Petersburg Times*), a Floridian regional newspaper widely known for its commitment to writing and narrative journalism. Both articles were recommended by the managing editor, Mike Wilson. The first one is a Pulitzer Prize winning narrative entitled “The girl in the window,” which was written by Lane DeGregory and published on August 3 2008. It is the story of a feral child found by the police at almost 7 years old and her struggle to adapt to life. The second is a daily piece, “9-month-old drowns in Spring Hill after falling into pool,” by John Woodrow Cox, published on March 2 2012. It tells how a mother and a father learn the death of their son who has drowned in their pool.

The two other articles were published in *XXI*, a French magazine launched in 2008, which only comes out four times a year and contains around 200 pages of exclusively long pieces, without any advertising. It claims as a model the narrative writing practiced in *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker* or the English magazine *Granta*, among others. Both articles were recommended by Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, the chief editor. “Le dernier des possédés” is the profile of Edouard Limonov – who has been a homeless in New York, a writer in Paris, a soldier in Serbia, and a political dissident in Russia. It was written by literary writer Emmanuel Carrère and published in January 2008. “Une beauté d'enfer” is about a fake plastic surgeon and his victims. Published in January 2009, it was written by journalist Sylvie Caster.

As it has already been stated, this paper does not intend to feed the ongoing debate on the notion of readability and the way to measure it. It will only use as indicators of the text's complexity the elements stressed by journalism handbooks. These indicators can be derived from the advice gathered earlier – which is reinforced in many other journalism manuals (Agnès, 2002; Grevisse, 2008; Roy, 2011). The biggest consensus concerns words and sentences: both should be short and simple. The analysis will then pay attention first to word length and sentence length. It is exactly the elements used in Flesch Reading Ease test. The test seems thus interesting in order to measure these two elements – whatever criticism may exist on its further signification. Its formula is:

$$206.835 - 1.015 \text{ ASL} - 84.6 \text{ ASW}$$

where: ASL is the average sentence length, i.e. the number of words divided by the number of sentences;

ASW is the average number of syllables per word, i.e. the number of syllables divided by the number of words.

Flesch Reading Ease test has been adapted to French by Kandel and Moles. The formula becomes:

$$207 - 1.015 \text{ ASL} - 73.6 \text{ ASW}$$

To have a first comparable measure, Flesch Reading Ease scores will be calculated for the American texts and Kandel and Moles formula will be applied to the French articles. The word and syllable counts will be automatically performed via an online application (www.syllablecount.com), while the sentence count will be done manually. Both tests are designed to be applied on a randomly chosen section of 100 words. Here they will be applied on three sections of 100 words in order to check if there is variation along the text. Of course there may be passages using shorter or longer words and sentences in each article, but using three passages instead of one already offers more refined results than the usual protocol.

All the sections used for the test would have contained more words if they had included the end of the last sentence – up to 46 additional words in one case –, which may largely influence at least the average sentence length. In order to get more precise indicators, an average sentence length and an average word length will be recalculated for each complete section – the first 100 words plus the words included in the end of the last sentence.

The three studied sections will start at the beginning of the first paragraph, the tenth paragraph and the longest paragraph – or, more precisely, the longest paragraph not yet included in the two other sections. These starting points were not completely chosen at random – only the decision to start at the beginning of the tenth paragraph was a random decision. The first paragraph was chosen because its importance is emphasized in the advice from journalism manuals regarding readability: it is supposed to be particularly readable. Then it was decided to analyze the longest paragraph of each story in order to avoid being limited by the shortness of one of the articles, “9-month-old drowns...” As this text only contains 18 paragraphs, choosing what passages to analyze only on the basis of paragraph numbering would have limited the analysis scope for the three other articles.

Words and sentences should not only be short, manuals state, but also simple. The analysis will thus look at the structure of sentences, evaluating the proportion of sentences where the traditional sequence formed by subject – verb – complements is twisted by inversion, interpolated clauses or subordinate clauses. It will also consider the vocabulary, looking for complicated and uncommon words. As three of the four articles submitted to the analysis are quite long, all this will only be performed on the same three sections of each text already used for readability measures – the complete sections, of course.

The last indicator regarding the articles' form will be the text length. Even if this element is only explicitly mentioned in one journalism manual, it is implied in many others and appears particularly interesting: the general tendency throughout journalism history has been toward shorter and shorter texts – due to the short attention span of readers. But many practitioners and experts consider that narrative require some length – precisely in order to convey a more complex message.

After examining the text's form through these various indicators, the second part of the analysis will try to evaluate the complexity of the content. But how to assess it? It is interesting to go back to what the scholars that allude to this complexity say. Clark mostly speaks about experience: by recreating a form of experience for the reader, narrative journalists add a layer of meaning compared to the usual factual report. Kramer refers to the idea of unscrambling the world: because experience is mixed with information the reader can not only feel the experience but also give it some larger meaning. This forms a second additional layer. But according to Hartsock, this meaning should not entirely determine what the reader will think; the story should remain somehow open. This would be a third and final layer of complexity.

The analysis will then take into account the experience created through the text, the information that comes with it – and explains, contextualizes or puts into perspective this experience –, and the global point that the text is trying to make. These three elements will be approached through two indicators defined by Michel Otten (1990): the places of certainty (*lieux de certitude*) and the places of uncertainty



(*lieux d'incertitude*) in the text. For Otten, the places of certainty are the most explicit elements of the text, the elements that will serve as roots when the reader will build his interpretation. He holds up as examples the title and sub-title, the genre, and the parts of the text that are connected according to resemblance, opposition, hierarchy, logic or temporal order, etc. The places of uncertainty are the elements which incite the reader to intervene in the story, to guess and make hypotheses. They include ambiguities, allusions, paradoxes and contradictions, ellipsis, etc.

Otten's lists are not exhaustive, nor is the search for these elements in the texts completely independent from the analyst's own personal reading; they need to be used with some flexibility but without over-interpreting the text. But these two directions toward which the indicators point could interestingly be broadened using the distinction drawn by Raphaël Baroni (2009) between the "intriguing" and "configuring" functions of narrative. For Baroni, when a narrative emphasizes its "intriguing" function, it plays on suspense and on the reader's curiosity. In the reading experience, this temporary uncertainty becomes more important than the final resolution. The "intriguing" function may also sometimes leave points of uncertainty unresolved at the end of the story. When the "configuring" function dominates, the narrative is organized in order to provide the reader with explanations and cause-and-effect sequences, to find meaning in the scrambled events that form life.

Concerning experience, one can wonder if this experience is fully described for the reader or if it contains blanks and ellipsis. And is it described just once or several times, maybe from distinct points of view? Regarding information, one can determine, for example, if it adds something to the experience or if it merely confirms it, and if the links between information and experience are explicit or not. Finally, as far as the global meaning of the text is concerned, it is also interesting to check if the writer stresses the links between the different elements of the story or let the reader imagine these links, if he emphasizes certain elements or not, if he answers all the questions he raises, etc.

After this second part of the analysis, it will be possible to get a global idea of how each text deals with complexity, both in its writing style and in its message. It will be time then to go back to the assumption that narrative journalism offers more complex texts carrying more complex messages – and reassess it.

Results

Writing Style and Readability

The table below presents the results of the readability tests, along with the results of the separate sentence length and word length calculations. The test scores are also evaluated from "very difficult" (score between 0 and 30) to "very easy" (between 90 and 100) according to Flesch scale.

Article	Section (starting at...)	Readability test score on a scale from 0 to 100 (for the first 100 words)	Average sentence length in words (for the complete section)	Average word length in syllables (for the complete section)
"9-month-old drowns..."	First paragraph	76,56 (fairly easy)	8,42	1,45
	Tenth paragraph	80,79 (easy)	8,67	1,38
	Longest paragraph	64,71 (standard/plain)	14,25	1,51
"The girl in the window"	First paragraph	86,42 (easy)	12,11	1,29
	Tenth paragraph	80,78 (easy)	10,4	1,39
	Longest paragraph	80,78 (easy)	17,33	1,29
"Le derniers des possédés"	First paragraph	49,53 (difficult)	55,5	1,5
	Tenth paragraph	77,85 (fairly easy)	27,25	1,45
	Longest paragraph	58,71 (fairly difficult)	28	1,65
"Une beauté d'enfer"	First paragraph	77,68 (fairly easy)	17,29	1,55
	Tenth paragraph	82,62 (easy)	17,83	1,41
	Longest paragraph	26,71 (very difficult)	73	1,9

Regarding the readability test results, both American articles present relatively homogeneous and high scores, globally equivalent to general public magazines (Richaudeau & Conquet, 1973). It is higher than most of the news material Flesch tested (1979) – though one must keep in mind that media have changed a lot since then. To give just a few examples, *The New York Times* then scored 39, *Time* 52, *Sports Illustrated* 63 and *Seventeen* 65. Even if the two articles get quite similar results, it is interesting to note that the scores of the daily piece are not higher than the scores of the long article – on the contrary. In both cases the first paragraph offers a quite high score, even if it is not the highest in "9-month-old drowns...". The scores of the French texts are much more scattered and often go under 60 – the level of plain language. One section of "Une beauté d'enfer" even gets a score of less than 30, which is supposed to be the difficulty level of academic writings – the *Harvard Law Review* tested by Flesch got 32. But the two other sections of the article nonetheless present high and similar scores, equivalent to the American pieces – we will come back on this contrast later. In "Le dernier des possédés," only one section gets more than 70, the other ones being under 60 – where texts start becoming difficult. Contradicting journalism manuals' recommendations, the section presenting the lowest score is the one starting at the beginning of the text.

Based on this first indicator, Caster and, especially, Carrère seem to take more liberties with the usual "rules" of journalistic writing. This is confirmed by the length of their sentences. In Carrère's article, the average sentence length is of at least 27 words and goes up to 55 words. It means that none of the three sections present an average corresponding to the low journalistic norm – up to 20 words for the general public, says Line Ross (2005: 137) – and one almost doubles the high norm – 25 to 30 words, according to Ross; Keeble is a little more generous, placing the maximum around 32 or 35 words (2005: 94). Caster's scores are under the low norm for two sections, but the third one rockets at 73 words. In comparison, the average sentence length of both American articles always remains below the low norm. Two sections of "9-month-old drowns..." and one of "The girl in the window" even present scores equal to or smaller than 10 words



per sentence – it is thus generally the daily article that offers the shortest sentences.

The average word length is almost everywhere low – except in the “least readable” section of “Une beauté d'enfer.” French words are generally longer than English words, making any comparison delicate. Nonetheless Flesch (1979) considers that the average word length in plain English should be 1,5 syllables. The two American articles never exceed this number and even the French texts don't deviate much from it – except, once again, for the section already mentioned.

When focusing on vocabulary choices, it clearly appears that the words are globally not only short, but also simple. Both American articles present basic vocabulary, where the most complicated word could be “hyperventilating” (in “9-month-old drowns...”). It is also hard to find words that don't belong to common French lexicon in “Une beauté d'enfer.” Even the “least readable” section mostly uses common – though longer – words, the only exception being “lipoplastie.” The section also contains a phrase in English, “*Aesthetic Academy Association*,” but the three words resemble their French translation, limiting the knowledge necessary to readers.

“Le dernier des possédés” also offers mostly simple vocabulary, but it contains a few more sophisticated words such as “allégresse,” “errance,” “embrigadement,” “cohorte,” and “malingres.” One word is even most uncommon: “hyperboréens,” a people from Greek mythology. This isn't the only cultural reference Carrère makes in the three sections. He also mentions a film (*Taxi Driver*), a literary prize (the Booker Prize), and three French literary writers (Henry Miller, René Guénon, Julius Evola). There is also a historical reference to Leonid Brezhnev in the very first sentence of the article. Besides Carrère uses Russian and English words. While the Russian ones are explained or translated, the English word “*welfare*” – which doesn't sound like its French equivalent – isn't. Even if the reader doesn't need to know all these references or the few more elaborate words to understand the text, parts of it are only accessible to a more educated public. This isn't the case for the three other pieces.

Regarding the structure of sentences, the four texts present more differences. Cox's article offers the simplest structures. A little more than half of the sentences contain only one clause. Sentences with several clauses mostly consist of two main clauses juxtaposed or coordinated. Only 8 sentences out of 31 include subordinate clauses – with a maximum of two subordinate clauses in one sentence. The more complex of these would be: “She walked into the house and, seconds later, the people gathered outside heard screams so steeped in pain that veteran deputies bowed their heads and turned away.” One would hardly define it as “overloaded with long subordinate clauses” (Keeble, 2005: 94) though.

DeGregory's structures are only a little more elaborate. Here the sentences composed of only one main clause amount to a little less than a half. Most of the other sentences are formed with two juxtaposed or coordinated clauses, as in Cox's text. But a few become more complex, for example: “She is learning to push buttons on a speaking board, to use symbols to show when she wants a book or when she's angry.” As in the first text, even more complicated sentences don't appear to be overloaded.

In “Une beauté d'enfer,” the proportion of sentences with only one main clause is similar, just under a half of the total. Most of the other sentences offer the same kind of structure than the complicated sentences in the American articles. For example: “On se trouve sur le haut d'une colline assez escarpée, au-dessus de la grande rocade à six voies qui permet de joindre les quartiers sud et les quartiers nord de Marseille, cette autoroute qu'on appelle ‘le Jarret’ et qui tranche en deux tout ce 4^e arrondissement.” But two sentences mark themselves out – the two sentences forming the “least readable” section of the text. Their structure isn't very complex but really long: 146 words for two sentences. They are overloaded not mostly with clauses, but with complements. It is visible in the punctuation; there are 9 semi-colons in the passage, even if its use is far from being recommended in journalism (Grevisse, 2008: 26):

“Michel Maure prétend être : inscrit au Conseil national de l'ordre des médecins français ; qualifié européen pour toute pratique médicale en Europe (cette qualification n'existe pas) ; membre de l'*Aesthetic Academy Association* (créée de toutes pièces par Michel Maure, cette association n'est pas déclarée en préfecture, n'a pas de bureau et ne comprend qu'un membre: lui-même). Mais aussi : membre de la Société française de lipoplastie (une société privée non reconnue par l'ordre des médecins) ; professeur de médecine et de chirurgie esthétique à l'AAA (il n'est pas professeur de médecine) ; titulaire du certificat de formation pratique Laser ; titulaire du diplôme de réparation juridique du dommage corporel [] .”

Of course Sylvie Caster is trying to create an effect through this accumulation. These two sentences contrast with the two other sections analyzed and perfectly illustrate Kramer's point on the writing of narrative journalism: when the writer masters clear and simple writing, she can sometimes stray away from it. In Carrère's article, on the contrary, the dominant pattern – in accordance with the readability measures – seems to be long and complex sentences, sometimes twisted with a simple sentence. It appears clearly in one of the sections – scoring 58 at the test, it is not even the “least readable” one:

“Ce qu'il faut comprendre, me dit Zakhar, c'est que les *nasboly*, c'est la contre-culture de la Russie. La seule, tout le reste est bidon, embrigadement et compagnie. Alors évidemment qu'il y avait là-dedans des fachos, des skins avec des chiens-loups que ça branchait de faire le salut hitlérien pour foutre les boules aux gens *prilitchnyi*, comme il faut. Il y avait les fachos de base et aussi les fachos intellos, l'éternelle et mélancolique cohorte des types malingres, fiévreux, mal dans leur peau, qui lisent René Guénon et Julius Evola, qui ont des théories fumeuses sur l'Eurasie, les Templiers, les hyperboréens, et qui un jour ou l'autre finissent par se convertir à l'islam.”

Finally, as far as the length of the articles is concerned, the two French articles are obviously not bound to shortness – more than 7000 words for “Le dernier des possédés” and more than 8500 for “Une beauté d'enfer.” This is obviously related to the magazine where both pieces were published: *XXI* only publishes long texts. But with more than 6500 words, “The girl in the window” proves this length is also possible in newspapers – at least in some ones. And, still more interestingly for this discussion, it clearly appears that journalistic narratives can also be way shorter, like “9-month-old drowns...” It counts less than 500 words, a very common length in a newspaper. It can however be noted that a more conventional factual report of the same event might have been much shorter – the statistics about drownings accompanying the article, for example, give a lot of information in only 111 words.

At the end of this first part of the analysis, concerning the form of the texts, it appears that both American articles present a writing style globally in accordance with the principles stated in journalism handbooks, emphasizing brevity and simplicity, both in the sentences and the vocabulary. The only indicator that really differentiates them is their length: a normal daily story in one case, more than a long piece in a traditional magazine in the other. The French articles are even longer. They also take more liberties with conventional journalistic writing. Even if “Une beauté d'enfer” presents a writing generally short and simple, Caster also allows herself longer and more complex sentences, along with longer words, if it serves her purpose. In “Le dernier des possédés,” Carrère's writing seems almost completely free of the usual journalistic constraints: he uses long sentences, most of the time with a complicated structure, and doesn't hesitate to choose uncommon words and to make historical and cultural references only accessible to a more educated audience – even the section that scored almost 78 at Flesch test in fact contains two sentences of more than 40 words, one of which consisting of six clauses, and a cultural reference.

Narrative's Complexity and Indeterminacy

The second part of the analysis focuses on the complexity of the content. Here comparison with mainstream journalism becomes difficult: manuals don't offer recommendations as clear as for the writing style. But we still have broad milestones: journalism first aims to provide information, experience is not usually considered as its main purpose – except maybe in sensationalist media –, ambiguity and uncertainties should be avoided – even if the point of an article can be to raise a question –, etc. These may be kept in mind while analyzing each article and comparing them to each other.

In “9-month-old drowns...,” the emphasis is clearly on making the reader experience the situation. What appears interesting is that some kinds of temporary uncertainty, here in the form of suspense, can in fact help create this experience: the reader who gets caught in



the story, wanting to know “what will happen next,” seems more likely to get caught in the experience too. Even if the end of the story is told in the headline – an important place of certainty –, Cox recreates suspense in his first paragraph: “Just before 11:30 Thursday morning, Michelle Williams got a call at work from her husband. Their baby, 9-month-old Kobe, had fallen into the pool. He wasn’t breathing.” Then Cox describes in detail the mother waiting for news. The announcement of the death is only made in the second half of the text. The journalist ends his story with the reactions of both parents. But the reader is never given their point of view; the story unfolds from the point of view of an observer: “Mrs. Williams lit a cigarette. Her hands trembling, she took short drags between long sobs and deep, heaving breaths. Wearing blue hospital scrubs, she paced beneath a magnolia tree in the gravel driveway next to her front yard.” The experience is only built on visible and audible details, letting the reader create what it could be like inside the parents’ head.

The information given in the text is minimum (the names of the parents, their age, profession, the number their children they have); the only explanation – but given twice – is that a door had been left open. Statistics allowing to place this particular accident into a broader context are presented in a box outside the story. The journalist doesn’t comment on the situation, points out responsibilities or security problems. He just describes what he saw and heard. The deeper understanding seems to lie in the transformation of a bit of information – a drowning – into an experience, which remains relatively open: it’s up to the reader to complete it and, maybe, to give it a broader meaning, beyond the pain described in the text.

Experience is an important part of “The girl in the window” too. It also plays on temporary uncertainty: who is this little girl that a neighbor saw in the window? Why is the police going into the house? Will the girl survive? And then, will she adapt to “normal” life? DeGregory brings the reader as close as possible to what it could be like to be this little girl, while also making clear it remains unimaginable. The reader’s experience can’t be complete: “She didn’t react to heat or cold – or pain. The insertion of an IV needle elicited no reaction. She never cried. With a nurse holding her hands, she could stand and walk sideways on her toes, like a crab. She couldn’t talk, didn’t know how to nod yes or no. Once in a while she grunted. She couldn’t tell anyone what had happened, what was wrong, what hurt.” DeGregory provides more information than Cox: medical diagnosis, expert’s views, contextualization through history and literature of what is a feral child, background on the girl’s family, etc. This helps deepen the experience – for example, it helps to get close to how the girl feels. But the information provided doesn’t answer all the questions raised by the text and even explicitly formulated by the journalist: “How could this have happened? What kind of mother would sit by year after year while her daughter languished in her own filth, starving and crawling with bugs?” The reader learns that the mother had a difficult life, a low IQ, a tendency to blame others for her problems. But also that she sneaked into the hospital to see her daughter one last time and still strokes old photos. DeGregory makes clear she is an inescapable part of the situation and calls some of what she says into question, guiding the reader’s interpretation. But she never judges, the reader is free to pity or hate this mother. Besides nothing of this really accounts for what happened. Some uncertainties, deliberately stressed by the writer, remain open.

The point of the story is partly undetermined too. Part of it is built through the contrast between the opening scene where a mysterious and too thin girl peers through a broken window and the ending where she can see the world outside whenever she wants, because her adoptive father is there to lift her to the window of her new room. There’s also contrast in the description of both houses, of her birth mother’s self-centeredness and her new parents’ choice to adopt her despite her disability. But still, questions remain. Not only “How could this have happened?” but also “Is she okay?” Of course her life is better. But does it mean that she is or will ever be okay? As a character of the story says, “It makes you think about what does quality of life mean?” The story doesn’t aim to answer these questions, just to raise them.

“Une beauté d’enfer” also offers the reader a deep experience: what the victims of a fake plastic surgeon felt during and after their surgery. This is exposed in detail from the point of view of three victims – it is even often them who tell the most painful parts of their stories: “Il m’a enfoncé deux Coton-Tige dans le nez très profond. Je n’arrivais pas à respirer. Il m’enfonce les deux cotons dans le nez. Il m’a dit : ‘Vous allez voir, vous allez être un peu sonnée.’ Il a commencé à m’opérer. J’étais imbibée de sang. Il a ouvert ici, au bas de mon nez. Il a fait tout ça à vif.” This is the most closely detailed experience in the four articles. It is even reinforced by numerous resemblance connections. The stories of the three victims not only confirm each other, but many vivid details are repeated. Some details are also repeated in shorter quotations from other victims gathered at the trial. On several occasions, the journalist herself explicitly repeats parts of the victims’ accounts. For example, regarding the passage already quoted: “Et, en effet, tandis que la Bentley est garée dans l’impasse, ceci se produit bel et bien : il vous enfonce dans le nez ces deux Coton-Tige qui vous perforent la cloison nasale. Dans un bloc infect.” There is a lot of information, mostly about the fake surgeon, Dr. Maure. His career and false claims are dissected; his personality is commented by experts and the journalist. Even his business card is observed in minute detail to expose his lies. Before the reader learns anything about Maure and what he did to his victims, Caster states, confirming an opinion she just quoted: “Le docteur Maure n’avait pas de rate. C’était un prédateur.” The sense of the narrative seems rather clear; it already appears in the headline, through the word “enfer” (hell) – which is also repeated in the lead: Maure put his victims into hell, which is thoroughly described. The fake surgeon appears as a kind of evil monster. Very little remains undetermined at the end of the text: only his motive – but does a mythomaniac and megalomaniac, totally indifferent to others and interested in money, need a motive to hurt people while taking their money? – and the verdict of his trial – as if the judgment of justice wasn’t what really mattered in the story.

“Le dernier des possédés” offers a very different kind of experience: mostly the experience of Carrère himself, an intellectual quest in which he tries to understand the man he is portraying. At the end, he gets some light on certain blurred parts of Limonov’s biography and achieves a more nuanced view – for example, Limonov isn’t the old outcast rebel Carrère imagined, but a true political figure. But the writer also remains with unanswered questions – among others, why does Limonov use references to Nazism in its political party? Carrère’s quest is clearly not finished: “Je me suis demandé ce que j’en pensais moi-même. Je me le demande toujours.”

Along the text, the quest itself blurs: Limonov’s life, Carrère writes, also tells something about Russia’s and the world’s madness. But he does not know what. As the story unfolds, the reader gets a lot of information on Russia, its political life, and what it feels like to live there nowadays – some fragments of other experiences. Trying to understand Limonov, Carrère meets his supporters and discover the picture he had of them is also wrong. But if Limonov remains, at the end, some kind of mystery, the larger point of the story doesn’t really gets clearer. The reader is left with conflicting ideas: there is still something disturbing in Limonov’s political party but it also appears as an attractive alternative in today’s Russia.

Conclusion

As already stressed, four case studies aren’t sufficient to draw global conclusions and establish dominant patterns. It is even difficult to account for some differences that were observed. Of course the difference between the two media publishing the pieces should account, at least in part, for the larger freedom of the French journalists concerning writing. But there may also be a cultural difference – an hypothesis that could be interesting to explore and could help clarifying the definition of narrative journalism in different cultural contexts. After the analysis, it is however possible to nuance the assumption according to which journalistic narratives present a more complex form than conventional journalism and convey a more complex content – which is the aim of this paper.

Narrative journalism offers the potential to do so, indeed. But doesn’t have to: most of the texts offer a rather simple writing, close to conventional journalistic style, and all of them present different degrees of complexity in their message. It means there is no correlation between elaborate writing and complicated meaning. As “The girl in the window” – which presents three layers of complexity – shows, it is possible to tell a complex and somehow open story without resorting to complex writing. And resorting to complex writing, as Caster at least once does, doesn’t mean the story’s content will be more complex – hers only presents two layers of complexity. There is no correlation



either between the narrative's length and the complexity of its content: a narrative as short as "9-month-old drowning..." can offer a deep experience and resist complete closure. Cox's article also indicates that the three additional layers of complexity, which narrative journalism offers, can be mixed into different combinations – they don't have to be added in a fixed order: Cox evokes a deep experience and let the reader make sense of it without giving him much information. The basis of this complexity, however, seems to lie in the rendering of an experience: it is the only layer that is present in all of the four narratives.

Narrative journalism itself is complex. It shouldn't be reduced to any assumption, but first studied – and at a larger scale than in this paper. If its complexity does not appear to be linked to its writing style – at least as style was defined here –, it would be interesting to see how it is related to other aspects of its form, and particularly to narrative devices such as point of view, dialog, the use of details, etc.

References

- Agnès, Y. (2002). *Manuel du journalisme*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Baroni, R. (2009). *L'oeuvre du temps : Poétique de la discordance narrative*. Paris: Seuil.
- Boynton, R. (2005). *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's best nonfiction writers on their craft*. New York: Vintage.
- Clark, R. P. (2000). The false dichotomy and narrative journalism. *Nieman Reports*, 54(3), 11-12. Retrieved March 7, 2012, from <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101830/The-False-Dichotomy-and-Narrative-Journalism.aspx>
- Flesch, R. (1979). *How to write plain English*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Grevisse, B. (2008). *Écritures journalistiques: Stratégies rédactionnelles, multimédia et journalisme narratif*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- Gutkind, L. (Ed.). (2005). *In fact: The best of creative nonfiction*. New York: WW Norton & Co.
- Hart, J. (2011). *Storycraft: The complete guide to writing narrative nonfiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartsock, J. (2001). *A history of American literary journalism: The emergence of a modern narrative form*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Keeble, R. (2005). *The newspapers handbook*. Londres: Routledge.
- Kramer, M. (1955, January 1). Breakable rules for literary journalists. Retrieved March 5, 2012, from <http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/1995/01/01/breakable-rules-for-literary-journalists/>
- Kramer, M., & Call, W. (Eds.). (2007). *Telling true stories: a nonfiction writers' guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. New York: Plume Books.
- Martin, H., Cook, B., & UPI (2004). *UPI style book & guide to newswriting*. Herndon: Capital Books.
- Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard. (2012). Narrative journalism. Retrieved February 3, 2012, from <http://nieman.harvard.edu/NiemanFoundation/ProgramsAndPublications/NarrativeJournalism.aspx>
- Otten, M. (1990). Sémiologie de la lecture. In *Méthodes du texte : introduction aux études littéraires* (pp. 340-350). Paris: Duculot.
- Pape, S., & Featherstone, S. (2005). *Newspaper journalism: A practical introduction*. London: Sage.
- Redish, J. (2000). Readability formulas have even more limitations than Klare discusses. *ACM J. Comput. Doc.*, 24(3), 132–137.
- Richaudeau, F., & Conquet, A. (1973). Cinq méthodes de mesure de la lisibilité. *Communication et langages*, 17(1), 5-16. doi:10.3406/colan.1973.3978
- Ross, L. (2005). *L'écriture de presse : l'art d'informer*. Montréal: Gaétan Morin.
- Roy, B. (2011). *Beginners guide to journalism & ,ass Communication*. New Deli: V&S Publishers.
- Scanlan, C. (2011, March 2). What is narrative, anyway? Retrieved August 12, 2011, from <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/chip-on-your-shoulder/16324/what-is-narrative-anyway/>
- Schraver, K. A. (2000). Readability formulas in the new millennium: what's the use? *ACM J. Comput. Doc.*, 24(3), 138–140.
- Sims, N. (2007). *True stories: A century of literary journalism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.