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Narratives of Death: Journalism and Figurations of Social Memory

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Abstract

Based on Brazilian news media narratives about “everyday” death, such as traffic accidents, crimes, etc., this paper approaches the temporal features of journalism, based on concepts such as Koselleck’s “horizon of expectations” and “space of experience”, and Ricoeur’s “narrative” and “mimesis”. It focuses especially on the relations that built social memory and come from the intertwining of the worlds brought forth by news narratives and those of their readers.

Thus, this paper attempts to grasp the reflexive relations between news narratives and everyday life. In choosing death as a main theme of investigation, it takes into account that death has the quality of being a peculiar and potentially disruptive social event. For death is seen as a defying meaning event which newsworthiness depends on an association with some other rather common themes, such as the overcoming of loss and pain, road conditions the behavior of car drivers, the heroism or flaws of the police force, and so on. However, those common news precisely create a remarkable tension between remembering and forgetting, since, for instance, each news story about a crime does not often tell its readers about previous ones. Thus, all recollecting of past similar events depends mostly on the readers’ ability to remember and associate characters and stories, i.e., to produce meaning for the present.

The arguments presented by the authors came from a methodological exercise which consisted in experiencing news narratives about death on their everyday routine. That exercise was based on the assumptions that: 1) the media do not have a unilateral role in “creating” audience interest in a particular event or issue, nor in making them visible according to their own, exclusive criteria; 2) one’s contact to media products and narratives is a regular, daily-based routine which is part of everyday life.

Keywords

news narratives; death; social memory

1. INTRODUCTION ¹

Death as well as the processes and places associated to it – funeral rituals, mourning, graveyards, memorials – deeply affect the way society organizes itself and participate in the construction of social memory, producing different types of bounds between death itself and generation and group identities (Walter, 2008). By remembering the past and constructing

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representations of events, journalism acts as a kind of public forum for reminiscences using its own objects as artifacts of memory (Kitch, 2002).

When a journalistic narrative deals with the issue of death, it involves the production of a particular social memory. The constant news coverage of traumatic or commemorative events associated to death emphasizes the role of memory. Wars, tragedies, the deaths of ordinary people or of well-known personalities support the extensive journalistic work of remembrance. All these “great events” have the power to affect the world. Haiti’s earthquake, for example, managed to break from the seriality of everyday life and made the cover of several newsmagazines, of daily newspapers and of the entire mediatic apparatus all over the world (Vaz & França, 2011). Therefore, such an event has the obvious power to break away from everyday life, as Quéré puts it, as well as from expectations, and is almost forcefully echoed by the media.

However, is it true that the daily news coverage of ordinary people’s death also contribute to the construction of social memory? Based on Brazilian media narratives related to death as a “daily fact of life”, this paper aims at understanding some of the relationships built between journalism and social memory. Since it is a potentially disturbing event, death challenges journalistic rationality and its newsworthiness will often depend on other associated issues such as the overcoming of loss and pain, road conditions, heroism of the police force and so forth. It is precisely this kind of news that explains the peculiarity of journalistic narratives and their propensity to promote a sort of “double oblivion”.

This double oblivion, which involves simultaneously a double “remembrance”, includes, on the one hand, the narrative format of such news, usually fragmented or short and encapsulated as *faits divers* whose conventions and strategies tend to be imperceptible. At this level, oblivion characterizes the news media movement that dooms these little deaths to disappearance in its regular cycle of succeeding news and publications. On the other hand, this double oblivion also involves death and the dead that, although emerging at the textual surface of journalism, are often apprehended and configured in a generic way. Therefore, the apparent register of the deaths or the dead is marked by indifference, and as soon as they appear, they are relegated to forgetfulness. Therefore, as opposed to “great events”, these little ones seek to “make us forget” that we die, that death is incomprehensible and occurs to us all, randomly.

We will first characterize this double oblivion by a short reflection on the temporal relationships in journalism, using the meta-concepts of “the space of experience” and of “the horizon of expectations”. Here, these categories will not be used to explore journalistic temporalities in depth, but as a methodological exercise to clarify the special relationships of news events related to “little deaths”. The next part of this paper will focus on this type of news as well as on their specificities. The characterization of the first dimension of this double oblivion, the textual dimension which is built on realism, the dominant aesthetics of narratives in today’s journalism, will be treated in part three. At the final part, we will explore the relationships between journalism and memory regarding little deaths and their deads.

2. JOURNALISM, TEMPORALITY AND MEMORY

In journalism, memory can be approached through the discussion of the temporal dimension. Temporal relationships are multi-level and complex relationships which can address issues such as guidance of the experience, coordination and synchronization relationships, for practical social needs. Temporality is not a specific issue of social communication studies and journalism. Most of the time, it is addressed by a myriad of approaches ranging from speculative understandings to being interpreted as an obvious fact of an empirical reality. Moreover, when looking at the special relationship between journalism and memory, some authors go so far as to diagnose, in different disciplines, a certain contempt for the reflections on memory undertaken by journalism (Zelizer, 2008).

By considering journalism as a narrative aimed at presenting a piecemeal knowledge on the world's current state of affairs (Gomes, 2004, p.321), and at constructing news as "images of the social present" (Gomis, 1991, p.11), the relation with the essential elements of the representation and experience of time – the notions of past, present and future – is immediately observed. These relationships inevitably become linked to the journalistic narrative and to the ways in which it configures diverse temporal experiences. Although the journalistic narrative is often confined to the strict boundaries of a specific news story or text, when using the dynamic process of *mise-en-intrigue* developed by Ricoeur (1997; 2010), it can largely be found in other texts contained in newspapers, TV news bulletins or web pages.

Such approach enables us to go beyond the episodic understanding of a journalistically narrated event, and say that "the description of an event is not confined to the time of its occurrence. Other perspectives run through it, as open lines of escape towards the past or future (Arquembourg, 1996, p.32). Such temporalizations bring us back to the categories of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" (Koselleck, 2006). When the experience refers to the past, it allows for remembrance. For Koselleck, "the experience is the past in the present, into which the events were incorporated and can be remembered" (2006, p.309). On the other hand, expectation refers to the future and includes features such as hope, fear, possibilities. However, Koselleck reminds us that expectation can also take place today, is the "future present looking towards the not-yet, the not experimented, what may only be foreseen" (2006, p.310). The experience enables to revive and judge past events by establishing, in the now, a horizon of expectations which keeps the space open for the future. Contrary to the horizon of expectations, however, the space of experience is saturated by reality (Arquembourg, 1996, p.32). In terms of narrative, both categories can work for the present, the future, or the past. For Koselleck, space of experience and horizon of expectation co-defined one another. Changing their boundaries means altering historic temporalities. The "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation", understood by Ricoeur as "meta-categories", are tools used to apprehend different constructions of temporality. Indeed, both Koselleck's proposals and the French philosopher's utilization of these categories make that clear. The connections between these dimensions allow the identification, report and interpretation of a journalistic event. In this context, memory becomes a key factor in understanding temporality.

In the field of journalism, there are at least three types of modalities relating memory and news production. One of them is the study of narratives concerning facts or commemorative

situations where journalism is seen as a device for the connection, distribution and presentation of collective memory (Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011). Some contents, the so-called memorable events, are worth mentioning here.

The *modus operandi* of narratives that give a familiar appearance to facts, in order to adapt them to the different audiences, is also investigated. Memory here is seen as the past, which becomes an instrument to produce and broaden the referentialization process of journalism. With the narrative, the event generates a reference to one's own story, to the "present of things past", which is a condition for its understanding.

"A story" becomes part of the statement, with references to other events of remote times, to "a past" that is part of the "background" in which the new information is projected. Therefore, a knowledge embodied in experience is necessary, and memory is the condition to understand the events on display. The authority the journalist acquires when dealing with the past should also be mentioned (Kitch, 2002; Zelizer, 2008).

Often, journalism re-uses its own past content and presents it as historical evidence. It also produces specific modes of "telling the past" and transforms this past into an artifact to read the present and project the future. The function attributed to the document or archive gives authority to journalistic narratives. Certainly, the connection between this general process of journalism and Koseleck's meta-categories are attractive, since they can help understand the existence of a typically journalistic approach to temporality. However, such a project runs the risk of homogenizing a temporal fabric which is both complex and multi-faceted. The difference observed in the news concerning important deaths and the short narratives on little ones must be taken into account, particularly their distinctive temporal regimes. Thus, we opted for a more circumscribed approach to analyzing journalistic temporalities, bearing in mind the "meta-categories" of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" in order to capture the peculiar phenomenon of ordinary daily deaths built by journalism.

3. DYING IN THE NEWS

These "little deaths" make us wonder if are immutable the ways by which journalism acts as an agent of social memory. Beyond remembrance and the past as a condition for intelligibility, is it possible to see other ways in which journalism can be involved in the construction of memory? The vision on little deaths is quite enlightening here. Curiously, it is even more interesting when one takes into account that "little death" in French (*la petite mort*) is the expression used to describe orgasm, both an extreme pleasure and a physical exhaustion. It is worth wondering if the constant media reference to "little deaths" is not a kind of offer in daily doses, something that readers overindulge in but never get tired of, even when they just flirt with it. Something which brings pleasure, but is forgotten to be remembered the next day or moment, in continuous circles of new pleasure and oblivion.

As such questions/suppositions could be interpreted as morbid, adjective which, in principle, should not be used to label newspapers or their readers, it is important to remember that outside the media scope, daily conversations that start with the question "have you

heard ...?” are routinely overheard. The question is usually accompanied by an expression of total dismay and could well be a cover story question.

The question is then followed by details of a terrible traffic accident that occurred in the city, at a particular time, when an uncontrolled truck going down avenue X, hit a number of cars, and killed a number of people. Dismay, is then followed by the interlocutor’s comments on the news investigation, which will be read in the big-lettered headlines of tomorrow’s papers, heard on the radio or TV news minutes after it occurred, or immediately checked on twitter. Our regular contact with the news media shows the “death -event” as recurring and referred to by a more or less extensive set of notes, news and reports, spread over different sessions and in several editorials of (TV/web/radio) newspapers.

However, when we pay attention to the narratives and stories weaved around these events, we can see that, instead of talking about the deaths, they focus on other events such as the life story of the dead, the pain of those who survived, the neglect of the authorities, the description of the circumstances which led to death, the investigations on the possible causes, general aspects that place the deaths in broader explanatory frameworks like hospital conditions, drug traffic, etc.

We will now examine some word-for-word transcriptions of what we call “little deaths”.

Killed by girlfriend’s ex. A 57-year-old man was killed yesterday in Uberlândia, Triângulo Mineiro. His girlfriend’s ex hit him to death with a wooden pole. They supposedly had an argument at the woman’s house. The suspect is in jail. (*O Tempo*, 27/02/2012)

Body found in the lake. Firemen found the body of a 14 year-old teenager in Frutal Lake, Triângulo Mineiro. She had disappeared and drowned while swimming. (*O Tempo*, 28/02/2012)

Homeless found dead. A homeless woman was found dead yesterday in an abandoned house in São Gabriel, Northeast Belo Horizonte. Her head was crushed and burned. No suspect was caught (*O Tempo*, 03/03/2012)

Woman stabs husband to death. A 29-year-old woman surrendered to the police after killing her husband in Carmo do Paranaíba, Alto Paranaíba. She said she stabbed him on the back with a serrated knife after a fight. He would have told her “Either you kill me or I kill you”. (*O Tempo*, 04/03/2012)

Two dead. Two people died in an accident between a car and a van on the BR262 road, in Matipó, Zona da Mata. According to the Federal Highway Police, a Gol from Belo Horizonte and a Hilux from Mato Grosso collided at km 81. (*O Tempo*, 05/03/2012)

Burned body. An 18 year-old youth jailed for theft but allowed to leave a rehab center in Uberlândia, was found dead in a thicket on Saturday. His body was in flames, he was gagged, with his hands tied in his back. (*O Tempo*, 06/03/2012)

If death puts us in the news, it is because we are going to remain anonymous, generic, undifferentiated. The ephemeral notoriety of our bodies and remains give tragic force to the narrative fragments which go unnoticed or, at most, are offered to the living, to be quickly

consumed and forgotten. We will neither be “notorious anonymous dead”, nor characters of *faits-divers*, but small remnants of fatality, rumors of a mystery (who were we? What happened? What is that story about?), whose nuisance, curiosity and fascination tend to be disposable and/or negligible.

Those few who relish our anonymity, who are moved either by morbidity, or solidarity, habit or circumstance will only catch a glimpse at our lives and deaths. The fragments to which we are reduced are simultaneously the synthesis of realistic aesthetics and its limit. This small portion to which we are reduced condenses the whole of our history, and our own reality quickly vanishes. The news is direct, rapid, fleeting like a daily reality in which anonymous deaths never stop occurring, do not provoke emotion, and do not displace, but just “happen”. Reality, when caught in realistic gestures, is doomed to disappear; the effort to see, to register, to fix also imply not seeing, not telling, letting go. Maybe this is what realistic anguish is all about: Instead of “real”, only traces, instead of the whole, only fragments. How and why should they be chosen, beyond contingency and circumstances?

In these small fragments, there is no possible singularity. There are only particularities that are restricted to the narrative segment and slightly suggest the possibility of universals. There are no individuals, just remains; there is neither depth nor deepness: any sinuosity is flattened by a gesture which does not care about us, we fall into indifference. Little by little, these small and undeveloped fragments of stories make up another incomplete albeit incessant story: we die tragically and accidentally every day. Undifferentiated, we are doomed to oblivion, to anonymity, to the dark recesses of the category: a woman, the dead, a youth, bodies, a man, a boyfriend, dispossessed of any singular quality. We just are generically remembered and, simultaneously, forgotten.

Brother kills brother with bricks. A 31-year-old land worker, Carlos Alberto Martins, was caught yesterday by the Military Police, in Mairinque, São Paulo State, after he killed his brother, Márcio Martins Silveira, 30-year-old, with brick blows to the head. He confessed the crime and alleged he was being threatened by his brother. Both lived under the same roof, in Sebandilha, in the town’s rural area. After receiving a call from Carlos Alberto himself, the police went to the scene of the crime and arrested him. He will be charged with qualified murder, since there was premeditation and he did not give the victim any chance to defend himself. (*Estado de Minas*, 06/03/2012)

In this news, a small note in a column published in a daily newspaper, there is no criteria other than the form of the death and the relationship between those involved to explain its publication. On other occasions, the “everyday deaths” appear as events unfolded from others, the idea of “*dead because of*”. The circumstance of a particularly unusual, unexpected, unintended death is emphasized. The collective deaths reported in journalism tend to be viewed from a cause and appear as a circumstantial result of another event. In the case of small news, death is the central protagonist of narratives that actually tell something that *will still occur*. Each piece of news indicates, in such cases, several ways in which death can present itself – a drunk driver, a fire, a fall etc. They are narratives of the several ways of dying which materialize our efforts of rapprochement with the public. All kinds of deaths can happen to anyone, they are available to all, to those whose personal stories indicate the

details of the situation, a map of the world dangers. Those are deaths *told* with rhetorical strategies which allow for contact areas and intersect with everyday lives. It is a day to day death which wants to be portrayed as routine.

Such news will always give priority, in its referencialization processes, to aspects involving the public: terms which indicate social roles that are familiar or widely accepted (“young”, “teenager”, “woman”, “brothers”, “lawyer”, “volunteer”, “minor”, “tourist”, “cyclist”, “driver”, etc.), terms designating locations and situations of a reference context shared by the audience, or the designation of the action in which the referred death occurs to a possible relevant framework based on the expectations of interlocutors (“electrocuted”, “run over”, “drunk”, “hit by bricks”, “beating” etc.). Regarding temporal aspects, this dying tells something that occurred but in conjunction with something that the reader/listener/ viewer can also experiment. Death is both what already *happened* as well as what may *happen*. Therefore, where it seems to be an event transformed into a description heavily individualized, the news is about a “possible dying” for many. Thus, these little deaths, if they can be directed towards the previously alluded *double oblivion*, they do so appealing to make death *familiar*. Such narratives maintain certain contiguity with the biographies that appear in place of the hearings. If they are seemingly “insignificant others”, its death, however, feeds the remembrance of a possible dying. The memory here is not of a past brought by the news, but of a projection, a future that the narrative reopens.

Therefore, death, unlike it is believed, would be exactly the threshold of newsworthiness, what journalism does not reach and seeks to avoid. The newsworthiness of death, less than inevitable, would take place when it could be interpreted and organized in a narrative form so as to enable the production of reports consumed in different ways by readers, internauts, listeners, viewers. The presence of death in journalism, in this perspective, would be a kind of ghost or shadow: something insidious, seeking visibility, which challenges the perspective whose attention is dedicated to other presences. This is because death, although mentioned in the stories, would be the impassable threshold of human understanding, constituting, according to Alfred Schutz (2008), our greater certainty and at the same time the basis of a “fundamental anxiety”: we know that we are going to die, that we walk towards death, but we avoid thinking about it, we create resources that postpone this confrontation and divert us from this certainty. Moreover, isn't the narrative itself based on that?

Under this point of view, the journalistic narratives regarding death constitute, therefore, ambiguous artifacts. When talking about deaths that emerge and are part of our social life, the stories told in the press, divert our gaze toward life, making us forget that we die and reminding us of circumstances, joys, miseries and contradictions of life. Without the importance conferred by the exceptional fact, we would still have the construction of the familiar to recognize the events and presentation of evidence for the “documentation” of the historical reality of these deaths. However, in the everyday deaths, these two dimensions are absent at first glance. Since they are short stories intended for brief consumption, these “little deaths” are not presented as memorable, but as curious accidents of everyday life.

4. FORGETTING HOW TO TELL STORIES: REALISM IN TENSION

One of Sigmund Freud's most important contributions to the theory of aesthetics is his study of the "bizarre". Inspired in E.T.A. Hoffman's tale, "the Sandman", Freud (1969) reflects on a characteristic of fantastic narratives, as well as on the human mind. Exploiting the ambiguity of the German term "*unheimlich*", Freud observed that the bizarre is never distant but, on the contrary, part of the domestic and familiar environment. The known, the already acknowledged, the customary, the recognizable are put forward because the elements of estrangement are repressed, hidden, as if forgotten. However, being there, being part of the world, the bizarre constantly threatens to erupt in daily life. The foreign, as Julia Kristeva puts it (1994), is not something external or alien but lives in us.

When we consider that "*heimlich*", the familiar, implies the "*unheimlich*", the strange, the realistic gesture that guides journalism gets new contours. In its effort to secure reality, either through strategies of objectivation of the events and/or from imaginative forms that are already historically constituted, journalism does not exhaust or put an end to the uncertainty of life. By shifting its gaze to the deeds of the dead or the causes and circumstances of the death, or by refusing to develop the life story of those who died, journalistic narratives cannot fail to state that death is lurking everywhere and at anytime. In the midst of this realistic and/or melodramatic apprehension of life and of social reality, fantasy and strangeness emerge as a ghost, always waiting for the opportunity to rise and to enforce their discomfort.

Luiz Gonzaga Motta (2006), remarks that, in the Brazilian press, "fantasy news" assume the pacified form of stories related to the exoticism, to beliefs or unusual cases that are almost always stand under the logic of entertainment which erupts at the typical and smooth surface of everyday life. It is worth noting that this pacification is broader than the newsworthiness mechanism which encompasses certain events from the perspective of the "curious." Such reports have, in general, a conservative narrative form, in which the topic treated barely challenges or does not challenge at all the realistic strategies of journalism. Curiosity, therefore, is a content, never a telling form which explores the formulas or the principles of journalistic narrative.

However, if these formulas and principles need to "occur", to take place in each narrative, their control over imagination and over the constructed reality is not always efficiently enforced. At times, because of precariousness, the realistic gesture can betray itself in its effort to produce the familiar and hide the bizarre. At other times, this betrayal happens because of the opposite reason: the excess of realism. This applies for the article published on March 5th 2012, in the pages of *O Tempo*.

Under the caption "Crime", the headline reads: dismembered body found at the embassies sector. The text, which occupies something like half a page, is composed of four paragraphs and a large photo, followed by the caption: *Mystery. Civil police at the site, nearby the embassies, where a body of a man was found dismembered*. The scene of the crime, then, is the city of Brasília, and the mere illustrative photo, shows an abandoned area, with thin thicket, against which the figure from the back of a police officer in uniform and a vest with the words "military police", can be seen. This photo already establishes a curious contrast

between the embassies, which are part of a noble area of any city, especially Brasilia, and the image of unkempt woods, typical of the suburbs.

When we follow the reading of the verbal text, at first, we face what could be just one more story about anonymous deaths, such as those that are a frequent target of fragmented narratives of small notes. However, the narrative develops a little more, expanding itself, and thereby enhances details and information which are used as a resource that “place the reader at the scene of the event”. The two middle paragraphs are especially dedicated to these details. One of them reads:

Criminal Experts were at the site, but little could they see since the body was in an advanced stage of decomposition. Wearing an apron, gloves, mask and goggles, an expert collected maggots and examined the body, which was in the middle of an unkempt wood, inside three garbage bags. In the first bag was the trunk and the head; in the second, the hips and thigh, and in the third, the lower part of the legs. (*O Tempo*, 05/03/2012)

The paragraph begins by describing the police investigation. Gradually, it calls attention to the victim’s body, a kind of crescendo that accentuates the decomposition and the state in which the corpse was found. To the information about the advanced stage of the deterioration of the body, other details that serve to clarify what is initially indicated are added. These details accentuate the eschatological and grotesque nature of the scene, something that had been only hinted at in the opening sentence. The beheaded body dismembered and distributed into three garbage bags, seems to reveal its inhumanity and its condition of squander, of undesirable waste.

The third paragraph keeps like the previous one:

Little could be found on the spot by experts due to the state of decomposition of the body. The remains were transferred to the Legal Medical Institute (IML) for more detailed tests, including fingerprints since the skin of the fingers was preserved. The maggots collected will be forwarded to the University of Brasília (UnB) for experts to try to find out *how long they were in the body*. (*O Tempo*, 05/03/2012, emphasis added)

Starting redundantly, as if repeating the information that opens the second paragraph, this recovers some expressions, such as “decomposition” and “maggots” and at the same time stresses the condition of the body as “remains”. However, to the grotesque and eschatological an ingredient, which had been just hinted at, was added. In the second paragraph emphasis was given to the expert’s clothes, whereas now, in the third paragraph, the expert-physician is put on evidence, and the “maggots”, the “decomposition” and the “remains” are transformed into information in the light of the expertise of scientists. Rationality prevails over the eschatological and grotesque, in an effort to control and dominate that corpse that will then talk about the conditions and circumstances of its appearance.

This small note already announces, with the photo that “illustrates” it, the dialogue established with the narratives of frequent criminal investigation in television series such as “CSI”, “Bones” and “Body of Proof”. To make the corpse talk is a recurring expression in these series. It shows the effort of the knowledge of the police-science-doctor to eliminate the incomprehensible and insert what erupts in the everyday life in a specific causal-explanatory

logic, realistic and factual. To mirror these stories, however, the news in *O Tempo* advances in a precision and accuracy attempt, bringing details which, at a first glance, go unnoticed, generating discomfort to more attentive readers. Less than draw attention to the value of rationality and its power to close the event in an acceptable way, the news, given the inconclusive character of the investigation, brings out (and reminds) the animal side of the human body condition, that, in death, goes back to nature, decomposes, becomes leftover and larval food. What should be hidden, therefore, comes to the fore. In the post-mortem life of the dismembered body, the larvae that decompose it are visible, they reveal themselves to an observer that, at first, is concerned with reconstructing what happened.

These examples show that the news on little deaths is the very epitome of journalistic narratives realism. Actually, realism as an ideology and an aesthetic tradition, offers fundamental metaphors to both objective journalism and to the prevailing narrative strategies. However, realism as a set of narrative strategies is bound to be challenged by historical transformations. Whenever a convention, a narrative form, is canonized, it loses its illusionist power, its capacity to speak of the world and becomes a language artifice. It is, therefore, typical of realism to renovate itself, revalidate and/or reinvent its discursive forms while maintaining intact its general proposal and some of its fundamental principles. The restoration of the realistic gesture therefore occurs in accordance with the time, and within a critical appropriation of past experiences. This renewal is even more obvious when we understand how realism guides the different narrative modes – be them fictional or non fictional, mostly verbal or highly audiovisual. Each realistic narrative is, thus, a hybrid in which past and contemporary strategies are either updated or forgotten according to the communicative and ideological proposals behind it.

Memory plays a strategic role here: what is still valid needs to be remembered, in order to give meaning and recognition to the current form while forgetting *other* processes and *other* proceedings. The realistic illusion, as the objective of this aesthetic narrative, is therefore kept as an effect of the concordant-discordant whole, to use Ricoeur's expression (1994, 2010). However, what is left behind, death for example, is always lurking and is only awaiting for the opportunity to become visible and happen to those who delight in death. Whether due to excess or want, or melodramatic humanization, the narrative presents the realistic illusion as something strange, fantastic, or even entertaining. In order to assert itself, the realistic illusion needs to be renovated and recovered, to be continuously searching. In such a way, we are under the illusion that the news can be transparent and can bring us to an external reality that surpasses the interweaving of words, sounds and images.

5. FORGETTING DEATH, REMEMBERING LIFE

The challenge of death narratives would apparently be identical to that of all other narratives, since it means showing something through signs, figuring something which is not in the body of the narrative, but which, somehow, should be reached by the latter. Death, as a limit event, exposes a tension in journalistic narratives even when they speak about other occurrences of everyday life.

It is impossible to know death, therefore, something else is told, something about life. Once the event has gone, we attempt to understand it, “weave” it, by talking about something else, by producing other events from the demands and potentialities of signs and languages, from narratives and from the pragmatic conditions of a specific communicative process. The realistic illusion that moves journalism is, therefore, a tension, an amalgam between forgetfulness (the event, the conventions, what was said, the previous news media edition) and making see, remembrance (other events, other conventions, other talks, other publications), without knowing whether it will be a failed promise or an effective one.

The double oblivion that emerges from the interaction between journalism and memory is seen not only as a sign of the transformation of the news in an inescapable documentary record of the world, but also as an informative craving seeking to reach the death-event, as much as possible. Even in this case, not all deaths deserve to be reported. The reported ones are only those that portray a picture “of the world”, that “document” it and about which, sometimes, a lot of attention and information is given, as if that could erase or minimize the possibility of forgetting the unremarkable deaths.

The reports of “little deaths” suggest other relationships. Not a lot of information is offered here, quite the opposite. The “ordinary” dead should be forgotten, because, on the one hand, there is not much to identify them and, on the other, they serve to remind and make us forget that... we die. Their stories, as texts, as narratives, are also highly forgettable. After all, anonymous deaths “deserve” texts also intended, in their aesthetic and informative quality, to a past with no return.

From this perspective, these “little deaths” could be narrowing the space of experience and horizon of expectation, similar to what Barthes had already suggested in relation to *fait-divers*, as news that refers to nothing more than itself. The “little deaths”, however, are not only *fait-divers*: sometimes they are more than that, sometimes less. In addition, to advocate this narrowing would be to forget that these “small deaths” emerge daily, in the successive issues of a newspaper. Unlike the famous deaths that would be unique, they repeat themselves. Furthermore, to consider them *fait-divers*, it would be necessary to consider such narratives as finished events enclosed in a past that is no more.

Such aspect could, at the very best, give an account of journalistic events that report death at the time it happens. But, as stated by Arquembourg-Moureau (2003), it must respond to a demand for meaning and intelligibility, for something written, and combine with the time of recognition, consequently, of reception. In such news, not only is a retrospective of events at stake, but also a text that drives the narrative to an immeasurable process of repetition, renewal and circulation. If such narratives involve narrowing, they are subject to the triple mimesis and circular process of pre-figuration, configuration and reconfiguration presented by Ricoeur. This perspective places them in the rhythms and movements of everyday life that, although unpredictable, inevitably puts them in relation to other stories of deaths, journalistically narrated or not.

Remembering and forgetting, therefore, are the dynamics of each narrative as well as of the general movement of meaning. Journalism does not remember some deaths and forgets others. Each death remembered in these snippets is also the forgetfulness of the

death event. Would this, then, be one of the movements of social memory: we “forget and forget ourselves” in this endless narrative? From the little death narratives of everyday life, it is possible to see that the relationship between journalism and social memory can be based not on a desire to establish the facts and give an account of the reality of the events, but on the intent to portray death without necessarily reducing it to its explanation.

We can see that there are deaths, but also clear distinctions regarding the media’s handling of the issue. Bodies can be exposed, in their death process, or banned; shocking and sensational aspects can be portrayed or parochial and family dimensions; death can belong to the personal sphere or involve the routine of many involved in media rituals such as the death of celebrities; the meaning of dying can shrink to private dimensions or acquire unprecedented public ones. Walter (2008) stresses in his studies that not only does the media offer new possibilities for publicizing dying, but that dying offers new possibilities for these media. From what we have seen here, it is still necessary to check in detail if, for the news media, such possibilities reach the familiarity given by the recognition of a common situation, a possible intersection, beyond a visibility that makes believe that the news is just what takes place after death.

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