

THE GOOD LISTENERS:

Joseph Mitchell (U.S.),
José Hamilton Ribeiro (Brazil) and
Literary Journalism

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the experience of Joseph Mitchell, an American literary journalist who humanized the art of profiles, writing in a personal and emotional style for *The New Yorker* magazine from 1938 until 1996, and José Hamilton Ribeiro, a Brazilian journalist who used to work for *Realidade* magazine from 1966 through 1975 and now is a Globo TV special reporter. It also suggests the usability in Journalism of a more profound interview approach as a method to better analyze and comprehend complex realities. The present study aims at a reflection on the role of journalists as readers, writers and producers of meaning in the contemporary world, as well as on the effect of this profound interaction between environment and interviewers on the journalist's personal and professional life.

Key-Words: Literary Journalism; Joseph Mitchell (1908-1996); José Hamilton Ribeiro (1935-); Dialogue; Active Listening.

THE ART OF OBSERVATION AND LISTENING

Following the globalization process, technology has shown a dramatic development since the beginning of the 1990s, when Brazilian press offices started to make regular use of computers and, by the end of the same decade, of Internet research mechanisms for faster and better news reporting.

There is no doubt that these information technologies indeed helped in developing the communications area. Nonetheless, a comparable evolution cannot be observed, at least to the same extent, in the quality of the texts, without regard to the media by which they are distributed. In contemporary journalism, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as professionals and postgraduate students, are still trained to prepare rigid forms and apply them as fast as possible - with or without the use of digital recorders - to obtain lines from the interviewees so as to fill out texts sometimes heavily outlined by editors or publishers.

This conventional way of performing journalism produces middling

quality reports both from the point of view of the textual production and the comprehension of reality. One possible explanation for this is that Brazilian journalists get their inspiration from USA publications, which tend to emphasize the velocity of the journalistic process and the ability to cover subjects in a short time period. Nonetheless, this approach is appropriate for daily newspapers, Internet websites, and radio and TV programs, where users are looking for a continuously fast update.

The problem is that this approach somehow became predominant in Brazilian journalism and extended into weekly and monthly magazines and sometimes even to all sorts of documentaries. There is also some speculation about the spread of short and fast journalistic content being one of the reasons for the Brazilian media crisis. It is suggested that communication consumers experience a sensation of *déjà vu*, since facts are treated basically in the same way by the different media.

The interesting point is that other schools of American journalism, such as Literary Journalism, are still viewed with some suspicion by Brazilian professionals, mostly because of the latter's assumption that they are closer to Literature than to Journalism itself. A close view of any American press coverage will allow us to conclude that in the United States both forms of reporting are complementary and both coexist, despite their differences.

It is important to stress that both forms are based on high standards of accuracy. As a genre, however, Literary Journalism demands "immersion reporting and narrative techniques that free the voice of the writer." (SIMS & KRAMER, 1995, p. 3)

Memoirs, profiles, personal essays, science and nature reporting as well as travel writing are the most common forms of application of these concepts; however they can be applied to every communication media, since the key here is the journalist's ability to "bring out the hidden patterns of community life as tellingly as the spectacular stories that make newspaper headlines." (SIMS & KRAMER, 1995, p. 3) In other words, its main focus is on the everyday events that deeply move us as human readers and audiences. In order to do that, it is important to be a comprehensive listener.

Use of dialogues

This new approach to areas covered by the mainstream press has its origins in XVII century writers, such as Daniel Defoe (author of *Journal of the Plague Year*), and in the founding writers of the European movement of literary realism, such as Honoré de Balzac in France, and Charles

Dickens in England.

In the 1930s it reappeared strongly, this time across the Atlantic Ocean in North America, with representatives such as Ernest Hemingway. In the 1960s, some journalists were experiencing difficulties in reporting a society that was undergoing deep changes, so they started to use literary techniques. Among them was Tom Wolfe, a PhD in American Studies from Yale University who called this movement New Journalism.

Wolfe also classified the four main devices of a literary journalistic text. The first is to tell the story using as much as possible scenes rather than historical narrative. The third is to work on the point of view, mainly with a first-person approach, or tell the story from the character's perspective. The fourth device is to record as many everyday details as possible, in order to indicate the status of characters' lives. The second one, the most powerful according to Wolfe, is the use of dialogues in full.

Rather than quotations and statements, the use of conversational speech allows the writer to transcend narration and create a better characterization, and most important of all, by showing instead of telling. It is a wonderful form of letting the characters do it for the journalist, leading the reader to feel directly involved in an event that is developing before his/her own eyes. It also provides the characters time to interact, without the sometimes frustrating interference of the journalist.

The proper use of this tool, however, demands from the professional high listening and comprehension skills. First of all, it requires openness to try and understand the other person. Secondly, it is important to recognize that passive behavior is not recommended, but instead a very active form of listening and responding to the other enables and improves mutual understanding. Therefore, on experiencing a process in which both parties engage in a deep and meaningful conversation, the two participants will have a better chance to obtain a broader view of the subject under discussion by the end of the interview, as suggested by the dialogical interview concept advanced by the French communication researcher Edgar Morin, and the Brazilian journalism researcher Cremilda Medina. (MEDINA, 1990)

Listening attentively is an art not very much stimulated among journalists, who are usually distracted, half listening and half thinking about something else, especially about the next question to be asked. Other areas of knowledge such as Psychology, however, have carried out studies on how to focus on the speaker to improve the quality of the conversation. (AMELIO & MARTINEZ, 2005, pp. 87-125)

The basic principle of the active listening method is to pay full

attention to the speaker and then repeat, in the journalist's own words, what he or she thinks the speaker said. It is important to mention that this does not mean that the journalist has to agree with the speaker. It only means that he or she must be clear about what was said. This enables the journalist and the speaker to both find out whether the message was accurately understood, avoiding misunderstandings. It also allows the speaker to explain better his/her point of view, opening up about the subject, so to speak, and thus improving the quality of the report.

A better way of engaging in a conversation is to really say what one feels and thinks about the subject. Active participation implies reasoning, in trying to discover hidden points, influence the other, and contribute to what is being said. It also involves taking the risk of exposing ideas and modifying the perception or attitude of those involved in the conversation. This active disposition demands much more from the listener, such as smiles and other nonverbal signs to indicate that the message is being understood, as well as evidences of interest, fun, indignation and/or surprise. The result, however, is an engaging participation for the listener as well as for the speaker. (AMELIO & MARTINEZ, 2005, p. 99)

Some Brazilian documentary filmmakers are remarkable for their active listening skill, such as Eduardo Coutinho and his *Santo Forte*, a 35mm production shot in 1999 in Vila Parque da Cidade, a slum in Rio de Janeiro. From then on, according to documentary filmmaker Consuelo Lins, professor in the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Coutinho decided to focus on the encounter, on the speech, on the transformation of the characters (LINS, 2004, pp. 98-99). This is what happens with Dona Tereza, a slum inhabitant:

Coutinho is not a common interlocutor because he is there neither to argue about what she says nor to give his opinion - this attitude of his is a great difference from what is done in many movie and television documentaries. His form of listening is extremely active, without questioning, however, what is being said. 'If I say that my aim is only to listen, there is no film. Should one be passive, the dialogue is over. Both sides must be active,' says Coutinho. It is this way of listening that intensifies the desire to express what is in front of the camera (...). It is in contact with the world, with the other, that his ideas take shape. Thoughts are not ready to be expressed; they are still confused and unformed, without logic and unity. The exterior, the social interaction is what organizes them. What is said by Dona Tereza and other Coutinho characters helps to develop the structure in meeting with the director during the filmmaking process. In some moments, one feels distinctly that many of them are having certain thoughts for the first time, as if

they had not had time for that up to now. (LINS, 2004, p.109)

Coutinho's method for making documentaries is rather characteristic. He works from what he calls a device, meaning a starting point for the film. Then there follows the research for peculiar and well-articulated characters. A team preserving the freshness of the first encounter with the director does this work. Specialists are not interviewed and speakers are paid to participate in the production. As often as possible the soundtrack is live and the presence of his film crew is visible in the shooting.

The U.S. José: Joseph Mitchell

In Journalism, one of the professionals who best used listening skill as a tool for textual production is the American non-fiction writer Joseph Mitchell (1908-1996). Considered the reporter who best captured *The New Yorker* ethos from the 1930s to the 1960s, he was born in a tobacco and cotton farm near Fairmont, North Carolina. His upbringing in Robeson County is believed to be the root of his passion for storytelling.

Mitchell attended the University of North Carolina for four years but left before obtaining his degree for a reporting job in Durham. On October 25, 1929, one day after Black Thursday - the initial crash of the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street - he moved to New York, the city that would be his home until his death in 1996. At the Big Apple, he worked as a reporter and feature writer at *The New York World-Telegram* and *The New York Herald Tribune* until 1938, when he was invited to join *The New Yorker* staff and started working for editors Harold Ross and William Shawn.

Mitchell and A. J. Liebling, another great feature writer from the New York newspapers, brought literary journalism to the magazine with their profiles of boxers, con men and characters from the Bowery and the Fulton Fish Market. (SIMS & KRAMER, 1995, p. 35)

Then and later, some journalists developed a special interest in celebrities, as did Gay Talese - considered by Tom Wolfe to be the creator of New Journalism. Talese became famous worldwide for the production of *Frank Sinatra has a cold* profile, dated April 1966 and considered the best story ever published by the American magazine *Esquire*¹:

FRANK SINATRA, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes who sat waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent during much of the evening, except now in this private club in Beverly Hills he seemed

even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semidarkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music blaring from the stereo. The two blondes knew, as did Sinatra's four male friends who stood nearby, that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday. (In <http://eugeneionesco.blogspot.com/2005/11/gay-talese-frank-sinatra-has-cold.html>, accessed on July 7, 2007.)

Instead of famous people, Mitchell was fond of the anonymous, especially people on the fringe of society such as gypsies, bartenders, and bearded ladies, as we can see in the following excerpt from *I Blame It All on Mamma*, from *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (DUELL, SLOAN & PEARCE, 1943):²

I was in the tenth grade when I became one of her admirers. At that time, in 1924, she was unmarried and had just come up from Charleston to cook in the station restaurant. It was the biggest restaurant in Stonewall; railroad men ate there, and so did hands from the sawmill, the cotton gin, and the chewing-tobacco factory. After school I used to hang around the station. I would sit on a bench beside the track and watch the Negro freight hands load boxcars with bales of cotton. Some afternoons she would come out of the kitchen and sit on the bench beside me. She was a handsome, big-hipped woman with coal-black hair and a nice grin, and the station agent must have liked her, because he let her behave pretty much as she pleased. She cooked in her bare feet and did not bother to put shoes on when she came out for a breath of fresh air. 'I had an aunt,' she told me, 'who got the dropsy from wearing shoes in a hot kitchen.'

(...) Miss Copey had not worked at the restaurant long before she got acquainted with Mr. Thunderbolt Calhoun. He has a watermelon farm on the bank of Shad Roe River in a section of the county called Egypt. He is so sleepy and slow he has been known as Thunderbolt ever since he was a boy; his true name is Rutherford Calhoun. He is shiftless and most of his farm work is done by a Negro hired boy named Mister. (When this boy was born his mother said, 'White people claim they won't mister a Negro. Well, by God, son, they'll mister you!') Mr. Thunderbolt's fifteen-acre farm is fertile and it grows the finest Cuban Queen, Black Gipsy, and Irish Gray watermelons I have ever seen. The farm is just a sideline, however; his principal interest in life is a copper still hidden on the bank of a bayou in the river swamp. In this still he produces a vehement kind of whiskey known as tanglefoot. 'I depend on watermelons to pay the taxes and feed me and my mule,' he says. 'The whiskey is pure profit.' Experts say that his tanglefoot is as good as good Kentucky bourbon, and he claims that laziness makes it so. 'You have to be patient to make good whiskey,' he says, yawning, 'and I'm an uncommonly patient man.'

After Miss Copey began buying her whiskey from him, she went on sprees more often; his whiskey did not give her hangovers or what she called 'the dismals.' At least once a month, usually on a Saturday afternoon, she would leave her kitchen and walk barefooted down Main Street, singing a hymn at the top of her voice, and she seldom got below Main and Jefferson before she was under arrest.' (In <http://www.ncwriters.org/services/lhof/inductees/jmitchel.htm>).

Mitchell specialized in writing about invisible characters, such as those in the Fulton Fish Market in Manhattan.

He was drawn to the community of river men in Edgewater, New Jersey, who had survived for generations by working on tugboats and excursion boats on the river, by fishing for shad during the annual run, and before that by cutting paving blocks for New York City from a local quarry. He was trying to preserve that past in his story, perhaps as a seed of resurrection. (SIMS & KRAME, 1995, p. 36)

In the post-face to the Brazilian edition of *Joe Gould's Secret*, probably based on the brief biography of the author presented in the commemorative edition of *Joe Gould's Secret*, documentary filmmaker João Moreira Salles focused on the American journalist's observation and listening powers.³

There, Salles recalls the story that once Mitchell, a bird watcher, spent almost two hours in his native countryside watching a woodpecker tear the bark off a tree until it finally fell to the ground. Later he said he considered it the most spectacular event he had ever witnessed. The Brazilian filmmaker also notes other characteristics of the American journalist, such as his slow, perfectionist way of writing, his peculiar sense of humor, his inherent sadness and great courtesy, as well as the mystery that clouded his last 30 years of life. (SALLES in MITCHELL, 2003, p. 139)

In view of Mitchell's perseverance, most people would consider spending two hours paying attention to such a scene a waste of time. Salles, however, argues that the tools Mitchell used to build up his work were precisely this attentive, constant listening, as well his discipline and patience. In his essay in Portuguese, Salles says: '(Mitchell) demonstrates that when you are patient, what seems to be trivial - a bird pecking a tree - could turn out to be an extraordinary event.'

When he was a child, in his regular visits to the local cemetery with his aunts, Mitchell was told stories about the people buried there. This experience probably inspired him to write profiles such as *Mr. Hunter's*

Grave, included in *Life Stories - Profiles from the New Yorker*, a collection of writings from *The New Yorker* magazine edited by David Remnick, head of the publication since 1998.⁴ It is not by coincidence that Mitchell's piece opens the book. According to Remnick, good profiles are hard to write:

The Profile is ubiquitous in modern journalism. We are awash in pieces calling themselves profiles that are about the inner thoughts of some celebrity; more often than not they are based on half-hour interviews and the parameters set down by a vigilant publicist. *The New Yorker* has not been the only home for better work. But whether it's in the *The New Yorker* or elsewhere, the Profile is a terribly hard form to get right. (REMNICK, 2001, p. xi).

Through Mr. George H. Hunter's profile, Mitchell presents the story of the decline of Sandy Ground, the oldest community established by free slaves in North America - founded early in the 19th century - on the South Shore of Staten Island. At first a farming community, established before the Civil War, the place grew as free black oyster fishermen from Maryland and Delaware settled in the region.

Mr. Hunter was the chairman of the board of trustees of the African Methodist Church and was responsible for the Woodrow United Methodist Church Cemetery, a burial ground still active in 2007. Mitchell, who was fond of going to Staten Island cemeteries to walk around and study wild plants, was very interested in knowing more about the community. As he recounts, the opportunity presented itself in a conversation with the rector of St. Luke's cemetery in Rossville, Mr. Raymond Brock, who suggested that he phone Mr. Hunter, since the old man's number was in the telephone book.

In their meeting, Mitchell found out that the 87-year-old man - who had arrived in Sandy Ground in the 1880s - was in good health and displayed an unusually good memory. Mitchell was then told about the rise of the oyster plantation community in the 19th century and its decline after 1916, when the Department of Health declared it condemned due to water pollution after several cases of typhoid fever had been traced to the New York consumers of Staten Island oysters. In the 1950s, the once flourishing free Negro community was reduced to a few families. Besides the community history, in a brilliant and very subtle way Mitchell reported Mr. Hunter's life philosophy. Being a very active Christian believer, after living so long he arrived at the same conclusion as the Ecclesiastes: 'All is vanity.'

Mr. Hunter turned and looked back over the rows of graves.

'It's a small cemetery,' he said, 'and we've been burying in it a long time, and it's getting crowded, and there's generations yet to come, and it worries me. Since I'm the chairman of the board of trustees, I'm in charge of selling graves in here, graves and plots, and I always try to encourage families to bury two to a grave. That's perfectly legal, and a good many cemeteries are doing it nowadays. All the law says, it specifies that the top of the box containing the coffin shall be in at least three feet below the level of the ground. To speak plainly, you dig the grave eight feet down, instead of six feet down, and that leaves room to lay a second coffin on top of the first. Let's go to the end of this path and I'll show you my plot.'

Mr. Hunter's plot was in the last row, next to the woods. There were only a few weeds on it. It was the cleanest plot in the cemetery.

'My mother's buried in the first grave,' he said. 'I never put up a stone for her. My first wife's father, Jacob Finney, is buried in this one, and I didn't put up a stone for him, either. He didn't own a grave, so we buried him in our plot. My son Billy is buried in this grave. And this is my first wife's grave. I put up a stone for her.'

The stone was small and plain, and the inscription on it read:

HUNTER

1877 CELIA 1928

'I should've had her full name put on it – Celia Ann,' Mr. Hunter said. 'She was a little woman, and she had a low voice. She had the prettiest little hands; she wore size five-and-a-half gloves. She was little, but you'd be surprised at the work she done. Now, my second wife is buried over here, and I put up a stone for her, too. And I have my name carved on it, along with hers.'

This stone was the same size and shape as the other, and the inscription on it read:

HUNTER

1877 EDITH 1938

1869 GEORGE

'It was my plan to be buried in the same grave with my second wife,' Mr. Hunter's said. 'When she died, I was sick in bed, and the doctor wouldn't let me get up, even to go to the funeral, and I couldn't attend to things in the way I wanted to. At that time, we had a gravedigger here named John Henman. He was an old man, an old oysterman. He's dead now himself. I called John Henmann to my bedside and I specifically told him to dig the grave eight feet down. I told him I wanted to be buried in the same grave. "Go eight feet down," I said to him, 'and that'll leave room for me, when the time comes.'" And he promised to do so. And when I got well, and was up and about again, I ordered this stone and had it put up. Below my wife's name and dates I had them put my name and my birth year. When it came time, all they'd have to put on it would be my death year, and everything would be in order. Well, one day about a year later I was talking to John Henman, and something told me he hadn't done what he had promised to do, so I had another man come over here and sound the grave with a metal rod, and just as I had suspected, John Henman had crossed me up; he had only gone six feet down. He was a contrary old man, and set

in his ways, and he had done the way he wanted, not the way I wanted. He had always dug graves six feet down, and he couldn't change. That didn't please me at all. It outraged me. So, I've got my name on the stone of this grave, and it'll look like I'm buried in this grave.'

He took two long steps, and stood on the next grave in the plot.

'Instead of which,' he said, 'I'll be buried over here in this grave.'

He stopped down, and pulled up a weed. Then he stood up, and shook the dirt off the roots of the weed, and tossed it aside.

'Ah, well,' he said, 'it won't make any difference.' (MITCHELL, 2001, pp. 25-26)

This extract reveals Mitchell's impressive ability to listen carefully to the narrator, recording with accuracy his way of speaking, as well as his view of the world. In this sense, he allows the reader to establish an affectionate bond with the chairman of the board, concerned about the cemetery's limited capacity. Hunter's idea of using a single plot to accommodate two bodies was aborted by the stubborn gravedigger, an old man used to going six feet down instead of the necessary eight to bury two corpses in the same area.

Hunter became furious when he found out about the double-cross, but ended up buying the plot beside that of his second wife to be buried, accepting the old gravedigger resistance to change. The confrontation with his own mortality, however, led the octogenarian not only to a practical solution, but also to a personal realization about a metaphysical question. By then, the reader, as mortal as Mr. Hunter, is deeply touched by the old man's thoughts, especially his unsuccessful attempt to control his life until its very end.

His last words - "it won't make any difference" - are the key to understanding this text about the mythical theme of the rise and decline of a community. And they also help in understanding Mitchell's style, who only started to write after the narrator had made "the revealing remark", Mitchell's expression meaning the identification of something unique, brought about by empathy between the listener and the speaker. (SIMS & KRAMER, 1995, p. 11)

The profile which Mitchell certainly devoted most time to was that of Joe Gould. He started working on its first draft, *Professor Sea Gull*, in 1938, and it came out in the December 12, 1942 issue.⁵ There Mitchell reported the saga of Joseph Ferdinand Gould, a member of a traditional family in Massachusetts and a graduate of the Harvard School of Medicine who, instead of becoming a distinguished citizen like his ancestors, went to Greenwich Village in New York to live as a bohemian. In his spare time, so to speak, he worked on *An Oral History of Our Time*, a collection of

common people's sayings, thoughts and experiences, supposed to be a dozen times larger than the Bible.

The second profile, Joe Gould's Secret - with the same title of the book issued with both articles - was written 22 years later, in 1964, and came out in two issues, September 19 and 26, 1964. It reveals the ethical struggle Mitchell faced after the publication of his first profile, under the impact of an insight that Gould's masterpiece did not exist at all, during a meeting with Gould and Charles A. Pearce, from Duell, Sloan & Pearce publishers:

I was exasperated. As soon as Pearce was out of the room, I turned on Gould. 'You told me you lugged armfuls of the Oral History into and out of fourteen publishing offices,' I said. 'Why in the hell did you do that and go to all that trouble if you've always been resolved in the back of your mind that it would be published posthumously? I'm beginning to believe,' I went on, 'that the Oral History doesn't exist.' This remark came from my unconscious, and I was barely aware of the meaning of what I was saying - I was simply getting rid of my anger - but the next moment, glancing at Gould's face, I knew as well as I knew anything that I had blundered upon the truth about the Oral History.

'My God!' I said. 'It doesn't exist.' I was appalled. 'There isn't any such thing as the Oral History,' I said. 'It doesn't exist.'

I stared at Gould, and Gould stared at me. His face was expressionless.

'The woman who owns the duck-and-chicken farm doesn't exist,' I said. 'And her brother who had the stroke doesn't exist. And her niece doesn't exist. And the Polish farmer and his wife who look after the ducks and the chicken don't exist. And the ducks and the chickens don't exist. And the cellar where the Oral History is stored doesn't exist. And the Oral History doesn't exist.'

Gould got up and went over to the window and stood there looking out, with his back to me.

'It exists in your mind, I guess,' I said, recovering a little from my surprise, 'but you've always been too lazy to write it down. All that really exists is those so-called essay chapters. That's all you've been doing all through the years - writing new versions of those chapters about the death of your father and the death of your mother and the dread tomato habit and the Indians out in North Dakota and maybe a dozen others or a couple of dozen others, and correcting them and revising them and tearing them up and starting all over again.'

Gould turned and faced me and said something, but his voice was low and indistinct. If I heard him right - and I have often wondered if I did hear him right - he said, 'It's not a question of laziness.' Then, evidently deciding not to say any more, he turned his back on me again.

At that moment, one of the editors knocked on the door and came in with proofs of a story of mine. He said that some last-minute changes were having to be made in a story that had been scheduled to

run in the next issue, and that because of that there might not be time enough to complete them, my story had been tentatively schedule to run in its place, and that he would like to go over the proofs with me (MITCHELL, 2000, pp. 141-143).

The proof reading took 30 minutes and when Mitchell returned, Gould was gone. In his office, Mitchell propped his elbows on his desk, put his head in his hands and thought about what had happened:

(...) I have always deeply disliked seeing anyone shown up or forward out or caught in a lie or caught red-handed doing anything, and now, with time to think things over, I began to feel ashamed of myself for the way I had lost my temper and pounced on Gould. My anger became to die down, and I began to feel depressed. I had been duped by Gould - I didn't think there was much doubt about that - and so had countless others through the years. He had led me up the garden path, just as he had led countless others up the garden path. However, I had thought about the matter only a short while before I came to the conclusion that he hadn't been talking about the Oral History all those years and making large statements about its length and its bulk and its importance to posterity and comparing it to such works as "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" only in order to dupe people like me but also in order to dupe himself. He must have found out long ago that he didn't have the genius or the talent, or maybe the self-confidence or the industry or the determination, to bring off a work as huge and grand as he had envisioned, and fallen back on writing those so-called essay chapters. Writing them and rewriting them. And, either because he was too lazy or because he was too much of a perfectionist, he hadn't been able to finish even them. Still, a large part of the time he very likely went around believing in some hazy, self-deceiving, self-protecting way that the Oral History did exist - oral chapters as well as essay chapters. The oral part of it might not exactly be down on paper, but we had it all in this head, and any day now he was going to start getting it down. (MITCHELL, 2000, pp. 144-145).

The following text is a painful *mea culpa* in which the journalist compared his attitude to the bohemian that had deluded him:

It was easy for me to see how this could be, for it reminded me of a novel that I had once intended to write. I was twenty-four years old at the time and had just come under the spell of Joyce's *Ulysses*. My novel was to be "about" New York. It was also about a day and a night in the life of a young reporter in New York City. He is a Southerner, and a good deal of the time he is homesick for the South. He thinks of himself as an exile from the South. He had once been a believer, a believing Baptist, and is now an unbeliever. Nevertheless, he is still inclined to see things in religious terms, and he often sees the city as a kind of Hell, a Gehenna. He is in love with a Scandinavian girl he has met in the city,

just as the city seems mysterious, the girl and the city are all mixed up in his mind. It is his day off. He has breakfast in a restaurant in Fulton Fish Market, and then started poking around the parts of the city that he knows best, gradually going uptown. As he wanders, he encounters and reenounters men and women who seem to him to represent various aspects of the city. (MITCHELL, 2000, pp. 145-146)

Mitchell thought about the novel he pondered over for more than a year, without ever having properly written it down. Out of his embarrassment, he felt closer to Gould:

Suppose he *had* written the Oral History, I reflected: it probably wouldn't have been the great book he had gone up and down the highways and byways prophesying it would be at all - great books, even halfway great books, even good books, even halfway good books, being so exceedingly rare. It probably would have been, at best, only a curiosity. A few years after it came out, copies of it would have choked the "Curiosa" shelves in every second-hand bookstore in the country. Anyway, I decided, if there was anything the human race had a sufficiency of, a sufficiency and a surfeit, it was books (...) only a very few of which would be worth picking up and looking at, let alone reading. I began to feel that it was admirable that he hadn't written it. (MITCHELL, 2000, pp. 149-150)

When Gould returned, Mitchell decided not to unmask him. He offered his usual financial support, tried to avoid any hints, and managed to leave things as they were, guaranteeing Gould a way of making his living.

Mitchell was a slow writer - he used to take two to three years to finish a profile. His last profile was finished in September 1964, at the age of 56. Although he kept his daily routine of work at *The New Yorker* until he died of cancer in 1996⁶, he never wrote a single profile again. In *The New Yorker* memorial, published on June 10, 1996, journalist Roger Angell quotes:

Each morning, he stepped out of the elevator with a preoccupied air, nodded wordlessly if you were just coming down the hall, and closed himself in his office. He emerged at lunchtime, always wearing his natty brown fedora (in summer, a straw one) and a tan raincoat; an hour and a half later, he reversed the process, again closing the door. Not much typing was heard from within, and people who called on Joe reported that his desktop was empty of everything but paper and pencils. When the end of the day came, he went home. Sometimes, in the evening elevator, I heard him emit a small sigh, but he never complained, never explained.⁷

He didn't stop listening to the world, but he definitely stopped reporting it. He said, 'When someone's willing to talk, you can let it lead wherever.' Some people credited his silence to the forever-hurting relationship with his father, who once said: 'Son, is that the best you can do, sticking your nose into other people's business?'

An interview given to David Streitfeld, a reporter for the Washington Post, published again in the August 27, 1992 edition of *Newsday*, apparently proves that he dangerously projected himself onto Gould's case:

You pick someone so close that, in fact, you are writing about yourself. Joe Gould had to leave home because he didn't fit in, the same way I had to leave home because I didn't fit in. Talking to Joe Gould all those years he became me in a way, if you see what I mean.

Mitchell's experience is compelling evidence of the importance of careful listening as a tool for Literary Journalism. Sharing information at such a deep level turns the reporter from a spectator into an integral part of the reality the professional plans to report.⁹ In the introduction to the commemorative edition of Joe Gould's Secret, *The New Yorker* fiction editor from 1936 to 1976, William Maxwell, wrote:

(...) the process of interviewing, as a rule impersonal and unemotional, was neither of these things. It has so much about Mitchell - his habits and scruples, what he hoped to accomplish and what he was afraid might happen - that it seems at times to be as much about him as it is about Gould, and could almost be taken for a double Profile. To the best of my knowledge this had never been done before and constitutes a breakthrough: the Reporter as Human Being. (MITCHELL, 2000, p. x).

As a human being, the reporter is subject to psychological impacts such as the one experienced by Mitchell. In our contemporary world, only receptiveness to other areas of knowledge makes it possible for the journalist to perceive and report the multiple views of reality with efficiency and sensitivity.

The Brazilian Joseph: José Hamilton Ribeiro

In Brazilian journalism history, a similar example of a good listener could be traced to Mr. José Hamilton Ribeiro, a former Realidade magazine reporter in the late 1960s and early 70s and nowadays a TV Globo Special Reporter.

Born in 1935, Ribeiro has so far received seven Essos, the most prestigious Brazilian journalism award. His most recent achievement was the 2006 Maria Moors Cabot Prize. According to the Columbia University Journalism School, this prize “honors journalists who have covered the Western Hemisphere and, through their reporting and editorial work, have demonstrated a commitment to freedom of the press and inter-American understanding. Ribeiro has become a role model for generations of young Brazilian journalists because of his unflagging energy and commitment to journalism he has shown in his 50-year career”.

Ribeiro is still producing high quality reports at the age of 72, but perhaps he is best known as the reporter who lost part of his left leg after stepping on a landmine in Vietnam (1968), where he was on assignment for the Brazilian magazine, *Realidade* (he was the only Brazilian reporter to cover that war). Back in Brazil, he has been ever since a creative professional who developed new forms of in-depth reporting for the magazine.

In 1975, when the military dictatorship in Brazil obstructed independent journalism in the big cities, he moved to the countryside of the State of Sao Paulo to renew the local newspapers’ structures. Six years later, in 1981, accepting a new challenge in his career, he moved to television, *Globo Rural*, at that time a one-year-old Sunday morning show that covered issues in Brazil’s countryside.

The show’s contents, from agribusiness to the Amazon rainforest, was ideal for him to implement long, in-depth, documentary-style reports, mostly with a consistent environmental point of view. Presented in August 2007, a recent report awakened people to the danger of transforming the swamplands of Pantanal, located in the interior of Brazil, into a vast soybean and sugar plantation. To explain it, the *Globo Rural* staff traveled to the American Everglades in Florida, and presented the challenge of restoring the area to its original ecosystem.

During an exclusive interview with Mr. José Hamilton Ribeiro on September 25, 2007 to prepare this paper, he was asked whether his attentive listening skill was relevant to the production of his reports. “Listening to the other is essential for producing long, in-depth, long-lasting reports. We need to establish a deep conversation in order to understand the reality we are going to report. The result is totally different from just going to the report scene to confirm an idea preconceived in the press office”, he replied.

Also according to Ribeiro, there are at least two important aspects regarding this subject. “The first one is that this listening process implies

assuming the fact that, as a reporter, we don't know everything, no matter how much we previously research". The second, he emphasizes, is that *Globo Rural* is not only an agribusiness show. It also presents the life, the culture, the leisure, the culinary aspects, the habits and customs of the people who live in the Brazilian countryside. In other words, it listens to its speakers in a broader and more human sense.

In the careful attempt to respect and give voice to the people in rural areas, the show captures not only the soul of his interviewees, but also the hearts of the audience — and some of them are in the big cities. As Joseph Mitchell once did in New York, Ribeiro's probing reports reveal the anguish and the joy of the rural population, their problems and creative solutions. In doing this, he attains the very deep level of understanding and reporting reality that Mitchell one day also achieved. After all, both journalists have been looking for answers to facts that have been intriguing mankind of all ages, such as personal identity and position in the social, planetary and cosmic spheres.

Perhaps the following observation by Ribeiro helps us to better understand this millenary quest of mankind: "Everybody is pursuing a dream. The ability to dream is the motivation behind all human beings. Only when the reporter awakens to this reality does he/she become a true reporter." Above all, studying the work of professionals like Ribeiro and Mitchell will certainly help us recover our journalistic role to inform, guide and make the readers better understand past and present events and future trends, as human beings, supporting in a fair and responsible way the communities we belong to.

| NOTES

- 1 In Brazil, this profile can be read in Portuguese in ***Fama e Anonimato***, by Companhia das Letras.
- 2 Mitchell has published six books. The first one, *My Ears Are Ben* (1938), is a selection of his newspaper stories. **Then** *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (1943) - also called New York's *Dubliners* -, *Old Mr. Flood* (1948), *The Bottom of the Harbor* (1959), *Joe Gould's Secret* (1965), and a collection of his best magazine stories **at** *The New Yorker*, *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories* (1992) - the book made *The New York Times* bestseller list of 1992 and was **included** among the same publication's best books in

- the end-of-the-year review. He also wrote *The Mohawks in the High Steen* (1949), which appeared in Edmund Wilson's *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1960). In SIM & KRAMER, 1995, pp. 35-36.
- 3 Increasingly over the years he went back to North Carolina, (...) going into the swamp now and then to look for wildflowers and for woodpeckers and hawks, his favorite birds. Once, deep in the swamp, looking through binoculars, he watched for an hour or so as a pileated woodpecker tore the bark off the upper trunk and limbs of a tall old dead blackgum tree, and he said he considered this the most spectacular event he had ever witnessed. (MITCHELL, 2000, pp. vi-vii).
 - 4 Since its foundation, in 1925, *The New Yorker Magazine* has had four editors up until now. The founder of the publication, Harold Ross held the position until 1951, when he died. From 1951 to 1987, William Shawn was assigned and his accuracy became legendary. He was replaced by Robert Gottlieb (1987-1992) when Advance Publications, the media company owned by S. I. Newhouse, from Conde Nast Group, acquired the magazine. Tina Brown preceded Remnick in the position from 1992 to 1998.
 - 5 According to Salles, Mitchell took **sixteen** days to collect the information and **eighteen** to write the first profile, but the editing process **he and Shawn did** took five months. (SALLES, 2003, p. 147)
 - 6 Two years before his death, in 1994, he collected his best New York profiles in a book, *Up in the Old Hotel*. The obituary, released by *The Associated Press*, on September 18th, brings this author's interview to *The New York Times* during the launching of the book: 'I decided if I could get those in a book together, I could put it all behind me. Maybe I will free me to find my way to the right door.'
 - 7 In http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Mitchell. Access on Dec. 26, 2006.
 - 8 In http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Mitchell. Access on Dec. 26, 2006.
 - 9 For more information on the Culture of Listening, a good reading is "*Incomunicação e cultura do ouvir*", by the Brazilian PhD José Eugenio de Oliveira Menezes.

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