

**BOOK
REVIEW**

***A narração do fato:
notas para uma teoria
do acontecimento***

*(Narration of the event: notes for a
happening theory)*

MUNIZ SODRÉ

São Paulo: Editora Vozes, 2009, 288 pgs.

REVIEWED BY **ROBERTO NICOLATO**

In this work Muniz Sodré bases his analysis on the principle that journalistic practice mobilizes different types of discourses, which have as their central point the production of news, the result of a liberal-democratic strategy which has been in effect in the society for at least two centuries. The author avails himself of the thesis that although the concept of news makes use mainly of the principles of objectivity to support the imperative of supposed neutrality, the journalistic discourse is hindered by rhetorical and imaginative procedures which form the basis for construction of the event.

In this connection, it is necessary to establish concepts and delimit borders between different ways of narrating, although the author makes it clear that, going beyond contaminations, journalistic practice is characterized by its own discourse, the informative discourse, appropriate for transformations of everyday life and more immediate communication with the reader.

The author bases himself on multidisciplinary analysis, mobilizing different theories in the attempt to understand the nature of the journalistic process, as for example, semiotics and discourse analysis, in addition to philosophical and sociological concepts. The analysis is illustrated based on texts from newspapers and books which range from classical literature to crime narratives.

The work “*A narração do fato*” (Narration of the event) is divided into three chapters: “*O discurso do acontecimento*” (The discourse of the happening), “*A experiência narrativa*” (The narrative experience) and

“O fato em vermelho-sangue” (The blood-red event). The first chapter deals with the distinction between event, happening and news. Sodré mentions Augusto Comte’s concept which defines the event as “a sensitive experience of reality” and, as in the case of other theoreticians, associates journalistic practice – sustained by objectivity and by the theory that the news is a mirror of reality – with the doctrine of positivism.

Although he does not desire to carry on with this discussion, Muniz Sodré reveals that, as in the case of the positivist current of thought, the journalist starts out from the “raw events” to arrive at the knowledge of something, or from “subjects primarily considered as factual in order to obtain, by means of the happening, some clarity regarding the social-historical event”. In this act of offering a reality that is all readymade and complete, with a positive value and supposedly neutral, journalists can be considered as the last positivists in the world.

The author interprets happening as a type of treatment of the event in which different actors are in play, governed by discursive conventions, habits and social practices. If the happening is the result of a collective constitution, it is not only the journalists who determine the events, but rather different forces in a hegemonic struggle for power.

With respect to journalistic activity, according to the author, credibility constitutes the touchstone in the relations between the journalist and the public. In this connection, the strategy utilized since the middle of the nineteenth century – when the separation between opinion and information took place – has been the search for objectivity in the reporting of events, a thesis which ran through the twentieth century and guarantees press professionals the presumption of expressing the truth of everyday life.

If truth pertains to what is enunciated rather than the enunciation, the thesis of objectivity is often used to mask different intentions. And, on the other hand, it is subjected to the nature of the communication media in contemporary times. “[...] in television or in the cybernetic era, mainly without the set of guarantees of the sources, it is increasingly more difficult to separate imagination from reality or truth from falsehood”, Muniz Sodré emphasizes, referring as an example to the succession of baseless facts exposed during the coverage of the airplane accident in Congonhas Airport in July 2007 in the city of São Paulo.

The author supports the journalist as the qualified interpreter of “a reality which must be put into context, reproduced and comprehended in its relation of causality and historical conditioning” and not subjected only to the speed of the passage of time and to the stereotypes of

common sense.

As to the news, although he does not see any consensus in its conception, he defines it as a report of a factual happening, inscribed in historical reality and capable of being proven. Seeking to overcome possible conceptual difficulties, he has recourse to the semiotic marking of the event – a category which he judges to be appropriate for defining the degree of newsworthiness of the happening – and to rhythmic punctuation, which he interprets as the different ways of putting in order a succession of events - an order and temporality that are subject to the new informative practices, such as for example the Internet, in which the receiver is capable of interfering and organizing the happenings. In this connection, there is a change in the rhythmic punctuation of the narrative process, to the same extent that diversity of discourses and absence of censorship are made possible. In digital media there is, in this sense, a compression of the time and space which alter the nature of the journalistic process.

In the author's opinion, it is necessary to understand the production of news in a different context from the one in which modern journalism was conceived, protected by civil law and by freedom of expression. Sodré emphasizes that in neoliberal times, journalism is converted into marketing strategy. "The media, in turn, are no longer ventriloquists of the national community but rather interpreters of themselves as the organic mouth of the market. At the same time, imagination and reality interpenetrate each other as always, but now with a very high degree of indistinctness. The credibility crisis which today affects journalistic discourse arises from this [...]".

It is based on this aspect that the author of *A narração do fato* reveals that the old liberal-journalistic truth "fluctuates like a currency without a gold reserve" and that, because of a "weak objectivity", it will be necessary to reinvent a new pact of credibility between journalism and the public, in order that the latter tries to take into account "certain fictionalizations, without the blemish of fraud".

REALITY AND FICTION

In the second chapter of *A narração do fato*, Muniz Sodré establishes borders between journalism and literature. Before this, however, he reproduces the position of critic Amoroso Lima, for whom journalism belongs to the literary field as "prose for apprehending happenings", and the conception of Antonio Olinto, who defines journalism as literature under pressure.

However, it is necessary to contextualize the thesis advanced by these authors in the perspective of a journalistic practice very close to the literature existing in Brazil until the middle of the last century. The decade of the 1950s marked the arrival in the country of a more professional type of journalism which would adopt the American model, marked by conciseness and precision and by the adoption of the lead and the inverted pyramid.

On dealing with the specificity of the informative discourse in comparison to the literary one, Sodré explains that the literarily narrated happening does not have the value of reality equivalent to the value of reality of the news. “This value is, as a matter of fact, the great contribution of the news, as a journalistic style, for the conceptual demarcation of the borders between press and literature [...], which became clear in the middle of the nineteenth century, that is to say, when the commercial press surpassed its capacity for publicity”.

The literary discourse, in turn, would include a plurality of meanings, the imagination of the events and an inventive language. This does not mean, however, the abandonment of literary procedures in the preparation of journalistic texts, as the author demonstrates on mentioning historically the contamination existing between the two fields, as for example in the experiments carried out by the magazine *Realidade* in Brazil and by the new journalism in the United States in the 1960s. Literature would not need just fiction in order to exist, as demonstrated by the narrative of *Os Sertões* (The Backwoods) by Euclides da Cunha.

Sodré makes use of the concepts of enunciated and enunciator and follows along the lines of Walter Benjamin’s conception of classical narrative – which preaches the end of the figure of the narrator with the arrival of modernity – in order to demonstrate that the archetypes of a mythological and oral nature still persist in the journalistic narrative, especially in the *fait-divers*.

He emphasizes that what is enunciated in the discursive style called news constitutes a narrative, that is, tells a story. And he offers a series of examples to prove the presence of literary procedures in the journalistic discourse, based on the analysis of categories such as temporality, space and narrative focus. The author demonstrates interest in the association which can be made of *fait-divers* with journalism as the social practice of the narrative, recalling that in the newspaper all everyday life is unusual, sublime, and abhorrent. That is to say, there exists “isomorphism between most of the news in the newspaper and *fait-divers*”.

To complete his thought, he seeks to understand journalistic narrative

not only in the ambit of the report-form in the structure of the text, since aspects of a mythological and rhetorical nature persist in its base, as vestiges of an oral and literary tradition – even if, according to Sodré, journalistic activity tries to unfurl “the flag of the reproduction of reality”.

The third and last chapter of the work *A narração do fato* is devoted to the analysis of crime fiction, seen as a narrative which has as its origin the newspaper text, in the manner of an extension of *fait-divers*, and with the same structure as the serial text.

Sodré tries to offer a deserved status to this type of narrative, considered by many critics to be sub-literature. He mentions the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom serial literature functions as a motivator for reading and offers as proof the fact that before being recognized, the great nineteenth century novels were texts initially published in the press as serial texts.

The author justifies that there is a visceral association between journalism and crime narrative, which are governed by the same functionality in the organization of the episodes – a crime to be solved or a tragedy to be told. “The crime narrative follows the order of the discovery, generally having as its starting point a *fait-divers* or an extraordinary event”, he explains. The list of authors analyzed includes Raymond Chandler, George Simenon, Leo Malet, Dashiell Hammet, among others.

The author makes it clear, however, that there is a difference between the modern novel, with its existential and symbolic density, and the serial text, whose objective was to enchant the reader with the superficialities of social life. For Sodré, serial narratives – from the crime novel to TV soap operas – can be considered literature of mediation, that is, as a stimulus for young people to enter the traditional universe of writing at a time of a preponderantly visual environment.

If the literary academic world turns its back on the crime novel, Muniz Sodré emphasizes cultural journalism’s mission to “invent a literary criticism more informative than metalinguistic, while attuned to academic purposes”. The author believes that journalism of quality, of densification of the discourse, can make a great contribution to “this type of literature which was born coupled by semiotics to the newspaper and continues to maintain structural characteristics of the news”.

The work *A narração do fato* constitutes an important contribution not only to the happening theory but also to the studies of the dialogue existing between journalism and literature, whose pioneering initiative in Brazil can be credited to the writer and journalist Antonio Olinto. It also

reveals that despite journalism having created a specific autonomous discourse, literature continues to represent an inexhaustible source in the search for plural narratives at a time of the emergence of new technologies in the area of communication.

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