

BOOK REVIEW

Notícias do Fantástico

LUIZ GONZAGA MOTTA

Porto Alegre: Editora Unisinos, 2006, 267 pgs

REVIEWED BY **Fabio Henrique Pereira**

In the last few years there have been a lot of essays on the relationship between news stories and cognitive processes. Empirical studies are, however, less common. The analysis presented in the book entitled “Notícias do Fantástico” (Fantastic news stories) by Luiz G. Motta (a senior Brazilian journalism researcher) is an exception. Taking 40 especially-selected soft news stories from an original sample of 350 dispatches that report bizarre events, the author conducted an interpretive analysis of the news stories as “language games”.

According to the author, the presence of strange or unusual facts tends to take objective news language to the border between fact and fiction, thus enabling a better observation of the meaning construction games between the rational and the fabulous emphases. L. Motta utilizes the report of fantastic events to undertake a pragmatic type of analysis between the linguistic intention of journalists in their job of constructing news stories and the interpretive possibilities of readers in the act of reading.

The conceptual starting points of the author are the “speech acts” theories of J. Austin, J. Searle and H. P. Grice. He assumes that news stories not only inform but also form (carry out other relevant cognitive functions) simultaneously, even when written in objective language. To identify the full cognitive process, the author argues, it is necessary to observe the pragmatic interaction and language game between journalists (narrators) and readers. Following H. P. Grice, the author situates his analysis of the bizarre news stories in the “conversational conventions” (the communication cooperative attitude of both communicative subjects) that take place in each communication situation and their respective “cognitive frauds” that are cooperatively accepted. In these cognitive frontiers L. Motta provides an analysis of the construction of

meaning in journalistic speech acts. He attempts to capture the subjective recognition of the implicit intentions of editors by interpretive and active newspapers readers.

Although Motta does not intend to undertake a comparative study regarding the influence of fantastic literary effects on everyday journalism language, he takes the fantastic literature theory of T. Todorov, R. Otto, G. Simmel, I. Bessière, D. Roas and other literature authors as a reference. He refrains, however, from defining what a fantastic phenomenon is and attempts to approach it through successive approximations. Taking into account that fantastic manifestations are intersubjective experiences, the author cautiously prefers to state that the only way to understand these experiences is to observe them in their own subjective empirical manifestations.

Motta then questions: can a subjective experience manifest itself in the objective language and rational communication situation of hard news stories in serious newspapers? What is the explanation for the frequent appearance of many bizarre news stories (typical of the tradition and the popular culture) in the pages of prestigious newspapers (he analyzes seven Brazilian prestigious publications)? The author then classifies his 40 news stories in three groups in order to better study them: 1) the strange-fantastic; 2) the comic-fantastic; and 3) the grotesque-fantastic news reports. All the stories fit into these three sub-categories.

Although many of the news reports L. Motta analyzes have a comic aspect (the werewolf that scares a small town's population, the woman who died twice, the robber who gives the stolen money back, the alligator that fell in love with an airplane and so on) that usually tends to lead the study to these hilarious extremes, the author does not stray very far from the systematic analysis of the cognitive processes stimulated by the fantastic news stories.

His conclusions are suggestive and very valuable for a theory of journalism cognition processes. From the empirical bases of the pragmatic analysis he undertook, L. Motta shows how news stories transmit to newspaper readers subjective cognitive effects far beyond the informative purpose of news stories. The author asserts that news stories are not just declarative sentences. On the contrary, they provoke cognitive performances to the extent that they surprise, threaten, frighten or make news readers laugh.

The author found that the existence of many linguistic and extralinguistic marks in news texts (hilarious illustrations, black borders, lexical expressions, use of metaphorical figures or certain verbs, adjectives

and so on) indicates that the editors consciously or unconsciously pass implicit “reading instructions” on to newspaper readers.

Decoding and recognizing this symbolic code or these meta-cognitive strategies, readers activate cultural values and models and draw their own interpretations of every news story. “Readers know how to adapt themselves continuously in the same communication act and ‘read’ according to editors’ subjective ‘instructions’”, says Motta. They react actively to capture elusive “meaning effects” intended by newspaper editors, automatically adjusting the cognitive contract in every journalistic communication situation.

Motta’s analysis is a step ahead in the study of the cognitive aspects of journalistic communication. As mentioned above, it is an original, serious and systematic analysis which observes the cognitive process in specific communication situations. He emphasizes that this process is part of the exclusion-familiarization dichotomy of the learning process that is continuously being undertaken through daily journalism. The use of bizarre or fantastic news stories seems to serve as a mechanism for confrontation of strange and familiar events. Suggesting comparisons and confrontations, journalists offer their readers a daily menu of ambivalences which help to position individuals in their everyday social life. That is the game. L. Motta’s book is obliged reading.

Fabio Henrique Pereira is Master in Communication and a PhD student in Journalism at Universidade de Brasilia (UnB) and member of the Centre de Recherches sur l’Action Politique en Europe (Crape, France).

E-mail: fabiop@gmail.com

