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Defining Narrative Journalism Through the Concept of Plot

Narrative journalism, as has been frequently stressed, offers stories closer to fictional narratives than to conventional press stories, at least in their writing techniques and in the kind of truth they intend to convey. But what has been less extensively examined are the implications of this hybridization for the characteristics of such narratives. This article will highlight how these narratives differ from Lits's notion of *récit médiatique* and from the "narratives" Revaz, Pahud and Baroni identify in the daily press. Then, using the distinction between the two functions of narratives that Baroni introduced – which he calls *fonction intrigante* and *fonction configurante* –, the article will propose a new way of conceiving how narrative journalism is both fundamentally inscribed in the realm of journalism and closely connected to fiction, through the concept of plot. Finally, the article will suggest distinguishing between different approaches – connected with different ethical stances – within narrative journalism, depending on the kind of plot the narrative offers.

1. Introduction

Narrative journalism can be broadly defined as

the genre that takes the techniques of fiction and applies them to nonfiction. The narrative form requires deep and sophisticated reporting, an appreciation for storytelling, a departure from the structural conventions of daily news, and an imaginative use of language. (Nieman Foundation 2013)

In the United States, where the term first appeared, this broad definition is also valid for other designations such as *literary journalism* (Connery 1992; Hartsock 2000; Sims 2007), *creative nonfiction* (Forché & Gerard 2001; Gutkind 2005 & 2008) and *New New Journalism* (Boynton 2005) – although there are some nuances in more detailed definitions of each term. Without entering into the debate about these different labels, using the phrase *narrative journalism* can be justified because of the precision of each term.

On the one hand, *journalism* covers a less extensive field than *nonfiction*. Nonfiction includes journalistic texts, but also memoirs, biographies, essays, etc. All these types of writing are supposed to be factual, of course. But they do not all abide by the same standards of accuracy: "In the world of journalism, accuracy reigns as the supreme clause in the symbolic contract with readers, and the same is true among literary [or narrative] journalists" (Sims 2007, 6). On the other hand, the adjective *narrative* appears to be more specific – and thus maybe less controversial – than *creative* or *literary*: the literary or creative aspect of this journalism lies first in the way the story is told. The various literary writing techniques that are used in this kind of journalism – the precise list of these techniques differs from one author to another¹ – thus serve the narration. The

aim is to tell a story that “would reveal truths beyond the reach of an ordinary news report” (Hart 2011, 1).

It is thus widely admitted that narrative journalism texts are closer to fictional narratives than to conventional press stories, both in their writing techniques and in the kind of deep truth these stories intend to convey. What has been less extensively examined are the implications of this hybridization on the characteristics of such narratives. What kind of narrative allows telling a true story with fiction devices and a literary resonance while still abiding by journalistic ethical standards? This is the focus of this paper.

First, the paper will distinguish this kind of narrative, which I will from now on call *journalistic narrative*, from other conceptions of narrative in the media, such as the notion of *récit médiatique* (Lits 1997 & 2008) and Françoise Revaz, Stéphanie Pahud and Raphaël Baroni’s classification of “narratives” in the daily press (Revaz et al. 2007). Then, using Baroni’s (2009) distinction between the two functions of narrative, which he calls *fonction intrigante* and *fonction configurante* – the first being more specific to fictional and the latter to factual narrative –, the article will propose a new way of conceiving how narrative journalism is both fundamentally inscribed in the realm of journalism and closely connected to fiction. Central to this new definition of journalistic narrative will be the concept of plot as defined by Baroni on the one hand, and by Ricoeur on the other. Finally, the article will propose differentiating between various approaches – with different ethical stances – within narrative journalism, according to the kind of plot the narrative offers.

2. Journalistic narrative

When one attempts to define *journalistic narrative*, the first problem is the ambiguity between the terms *narrative* and *story*, often considered equivalent in everyday life. Without even entering into narratological distinctions, *narrative* and *story* must be distinguished in journalism:

Even though they call all articles “stories,” journalists and those studying journalism distinguish between the dryer, business-like inverted pyramid narratives of conventional journalism and the freer, more flexible forms they call “narrative” or “literary” journalism [...]. (Dardenne 2005, 267)

There isn’t, however, a unique definition of journalistic narrative on which all scholars and practitioners agree. On the contrary, it may even seem as if there are almost as many definitions as there are people interested in narrative journalism. If we focus on the definitions of experts – who are often practitioners themselves but attempt to go beyond their own practice to reach a more global view – and complete these with the most recurring elements mentioned by practitioners, it is nonetheless possible to propose a synthetic definition (Vanooost 2013):

A journalistic narrative can be defined as a story in which characters perform actions unfolding over time in a certain setting. The journalist uses writ-

ing techniques often considered as “literary.” These include the use of voice, techniques that allow creating a form of experience for the reader (i.e. detail, expression of thoughts and feelings, etc.), and techniques that aim at capturing and maintaining the interest of this reader (i.e. suspense, conflict, tension between a complication and its resolution, etc.). The final goal of a journalistic narrative is to offer a better understanding of the real world, which implies that every detail has to be accurately reported.

If this conception of narrative should be distinguished from the reports journalists usually refer to as “stories,” it should also be distinguished from scholarly concepts such as the notion of *récit médiatique*, which I will translate as “media narrative.”² Marc Lits, among others, introduced this notion because he thinks that a narrative prototype is central in the media, so central that it even pervades the other text types one can find in the media (1997, 45). Media narrative is thus a notion much broader than narrative as narratologists or linguists define it. It is a text – in the very broad sense of an “abstract entity” (1997, 45) – that organizes real pre-existing material at least partly according to a narrative logic or around narrative elements (a beginning, middle and end, characters, etc.) and “whose individual and collective refiguration [the third phase of Ricoeur’s triple *mimesis*, during which readers “receive” the narrative], which creates identity, is taken into account, with its social roots” (1997, 45).

Media narrative generally consists of aggregated fragments, which may be narrative texts but may also be more argumentative texts, such as editorials, or even pictures, caricatures, etc. Media narrative grows from one newspaper to another, and even from newspapers to radio, television or the Internet. It closely follows the events or reports them as they occur – in live television for example. It is thus not clear where media narrative starts and where it ends. Moreover, no single reader will ever “read” it entirely; every reader rather gets their own narrative according to their own media consumption.

Françoise Revaz, Stéphanie Pahud and Raphaël Baroni (2007) propose to classify the different types of “narratives” – in the broad sense of texts of action³ – that exist in the daily press – they thus consider only a small sample of all the texts that can be seen as media narratives. They first distinguish between three degrees of narrativity: simple chronology in “chronicles” (*chroniques*), “accounts” (*relations*) that also lay down cause-and-effect relationships, and “narratives” *per se* (*récits*) presenting a complication⁴ and its denouement – Revaz argues that these “true” narratives can be found in factual genres, such as reportage, but also in opinion pieces (1997). They also categorize narrative texts in the daily press in two ways according to their relationship to time: some are retrospective, others are prospective; some are published as isolated items, others are inscribed in series. They call the latter *feuilletons médiatiques*, series of articles about events that last for some time (such as strikes) or have several episodes (e.g. a crime, the hunt and capture of the suspect, then his trial and finally the verdict) and are thus characterized by tension between what has already happened and what will occur next.

Lits and Revaz's works emphasize the peculiarity of narrative journalism. Of course, even if they are designed to stand alone, journalistic narratives can be – and probably always are – part of larger media narratives. But they are more articulated than most fragments of media narratives: not only do they present all the elements of a story, but they also, and maybe more importantly, tend to offer tension between a complication and its resolution – they are “true” narratives, according to Revaz's categories. Because they need a denouement, they are retrospective. They can be one-off as well as serial items but they are not *feuilletons médiatiques* in Revaz's sense: their division into parts does not depend on the future course of events, unknown to the journalist; it is the result of a conscious decision by the journalist, the last part of the series being usually written before the first one is published.

This difference seems particularly interesting: according to Raphaël Baroni (2009), who studied “narratives” in the press with Revaz, most “true” narratives in newspapers are in fact *feuilletons médiatiques*, precisely because of their unpredictable serialization, which is built not on artificial, but on real tension – just like the reader, the journalist does not know what is going to happen next. Conversely, for Baroni, isolated – and serial, I would add – retrospective articles, designed for busy readers, fail to create tension: they communicate the most important elements, the resolution, in the headline and in the first sentences. I argue that journalistic narratives form a very particular group of press “narratives” that go beyond this opposition and are able to create the same kind of narrative tension that Baroni mostly sees in fictional narratives.

3. Proposal for a new definition

3.1. The concept of plot⁵ and Baroni's two functions of narrative

Following Revaz, Baroni strictly defines narrative as presenting “a *plot* – essentially consisting of a *complication* and a *denouement* – and *tension*; these two combined traits distinguish narrative from other forms of textualized action such as chronicle, recipe or account” (2007, 51). This is a quite restrictive conception of plot, as Baroni himself admits. Yet Baroni's work is in dialogue with Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, in which the concept of plot gets a broader meaning. Ricoeur uses the term *plot* for Aristotle's “*muthos*,” i.e. “the organization of the events” (1983, 67). Plot, for Ricoeur, refers to the configuration operation, the act of “grasping together” various elements that creates a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (1983, 127). In other words, Ricoeur defines plot as a model of “discordant concordance,” (1983, 86) in which concordance nonetheless prevails over discordance – telling a story would be the art of “making discordance appear concordant” (1983, 88).

In Baroni's conception of plot, by contrast, there is a predominance of discordance over concordance because the denouement remains uncertain – even

optional, as Baroni states in later works (2009, 19) – which opens multiple possibilities. Plot and tension work together in Baroni’s view: tension is created through the delay between the complication and the denouement. The narratologist distinguishes two kinds of tension, each involving different cognitive activities and different emotions for the reader: either the reader wonders what will happen next and feels “suspense,” or he tries to solve a mystery, to understand a present or past situation and experiences “curiosity.”⁶ In the first case, the narrative is generally told mostly chronologically and rather straightforwardly, the uncertainty arising from the instability of the situation. In the second case, the uncertainty arises because the events are presented in a temporarily blurred manner (2007, 88). In either case, Baroni argues, the uncertainty results in discordance prevailing over concordance – even if some concordance is generally restored at the end.

According to Baroni, both tension and the emotions it provokes not only define the poetics of narratives, but also determine their “anthropological function”:

The rendition of our existential tensions would not only “entertain” or “move” us, it would be a way to control these *passions*, to familiarize ourselves with what frightens us or what, by its very nature, eludes us, or even to explore new virtualities of our possible actions, to solve some identity and temporal aporias, and to save us from boredom and routine. We think that the very meaning of narrative lies, for a large part, [...] in the uncertainty created through the emplotment and in the total surprise that often accompanies the denouement. (2007, 34)

Like most narratologists, Baroni only studied fictional narratives at first. But then, responding to Genette’s call to extend the scope of narratology (1983, 66), he turned towards factual narratives. As already explained, Baroni works with reference to Ricoeur’s framework – even if he criticizes and partly reformulates this framework. Yet Ricoeur took into account both fictional and historical narratives, and Baroni acknowledges that his conception of plot doesn’t work for the latter:

History does not describe events within which the links between all the facts can be explained entirely, but it aims at this clarification; it does not attempt to leave causality in the dark in order to release the power of its plot. It is the very definition of historiography as a hermeneutic discipline based on sources, clues and testimonies, that commands this pursuit of truth, this attempt to shed light on the world’s events. (2009, 64)

Studying both conversational and press “narratives,” Baroni arrives at the idea that there are two kinds of narrative or, to be more accurate, that two different functions can be present in narrative. According to Baroni, these functions must not be seen as impervious categories, but rather as two extremes between which a lot of variations are possible. He calls them *fonction intriguante*, which I translate as “intriguing”⁷ function, and *fonction configurante*, or “configuring” function (2009, 63). The first one refers to Baroni’s conception of plot, the second one to Ricoeur’s.

Narratives in which the intriguing function dominates present both a plot with a complication and – at least the expectation of – a denouement, and narrative tension. They are mostly fictional narratives because, as the material is invented, the author is free to arrange it completely as he wishes. The configu-

ing function refers to Ricoeur's configuration: it aims at creating a retrospective understanding, at pointing out causal relations, at giving meaning to what happened. It usually dominates in factual narratives where the author wants to convey a reality he/she experienced and make it understandable to others.

As in his previous work, Baroni asserts that the dominant function not only influences the poetics of narratives, but also their "anthropological function." More intriguing narratives, which "momentarily distort the sense of the events in order to re-create passion" (2008), "render the uncertainty of a future consisting of plans, hopes and fears on the one hand, and the underdetermined aspect of our relation to the world on the other hand" (2007, 406). They help us make the inescapable uncertainty of human life manageable. More configuring narratives "try, on the contrary, to close the gap created by the event, to give sense to the insanity of experience" (2008).

3.2. Reconciling the two functions

Baroni argues that the configuring function clearly dominates in isolated press "narratives:" the inverted pyramid model, which generally prevails in conventional journalism, requires organizing the information into a hierarchy, starting with the most important elements and leaving the details for the end. It means that the denouement has to be told in the very first lines, or even in the headline.

On this scale the construction of the press "narrative"⁸ seems closer to the retrospective configuration of history works than to the reticent dynamics of fiction pieces; it crushes temporality; it favors elaborating an explanation of what happened to the detriment of creating some tension that would be aimed at an uncertain denouement. What the journalist attempts to reconstruct is coherence, allowing to link the recent event to a larger experience or state of the society. (2009, 77)

But on a larger scale – the scale of the *feuilleton médiatique* –, when the outcome of an event is not yet known or when its causes remain unclear, the journalist can stress these uncertainties and create suspense or curiosity for the reader. Then one can "observe the passionate effects of a fragile plot, the expansion of a narrative in progress, whose multiple virtual futures keep the readers interested" (Baroni 2009, 80). However, this plot is essentially different from the kind of plot that can be found in fiction: it grows from a real uncertainty regarding the denouement of the events; it is the result of ignorance shared by both the journalist and the reader. In fictional narratives, by contrast, the plot depends on the author's writing strategy; the feigned uncertainty is under his/her control.

This is also true in narrative journalism. As I have pointed out, journalistic narratives differ from *feuilletons médiatiques* and most media narratives because they are retrospective. They tell events that have been "completed" or, at least, to which the journalist brings an end – of course, the end of an article is always somewhat artificial, but in a journalistic narrative the end is dictated by the

journalist's writing choices, and not by the deadline for publication and the rhythm of the events. The journalist chooses where to start and where to stop according to a certain narrative project. And according to narrative journalism experts and practitioners, this project is supposed to contain at least some kind of tension and at best a complication and its resolution – a synonym for Baroni's denouement. Franklin even writes that “[a] story with only a complication and no resolution won't ever get printed. A story with a resolution and no complication may, but it will be dramatically weaker for the lack” (1986, 79). The intriguing function appears thus to be central to journalistic narratives.

But journalistic narratives are still journalism: their mission is to inform – even if it is in a different way, through experience. According to Kramer and Call, narrative journalism “unscrambles and sorts the messages of a complex world” (2007, xv). “If it is not an antidote to bewilderment, at least it unites daily experiences – including emotional ones – with the wild plenitude of information that can be applied to experience” (Kramer 1995, 34). As journalistic narratives obviously aim at “retrospectively ‘understanding’ the story that is already over” (Baroni 2009, 89), the configuring function is also at their core.

It seems then that both functions have to interact closely in journalistic narratives, as they are both part of the very definition of these narratives. Nonetheless, this does not mean that every journalistic narrative has to present the same balance between the two functions. As Baroni states, the two functions should be seen as two extremes of a continuum. Therefore, there seems to be a huge range of possibilities, which opens up many potential variations in the poetics and “anthropological function” of narrative journalism. But as it is journalism, information intended for the public, the variations in the “anthropological function” appear particularly important: they have ethical implications.

Baroni stresses the dilemma of all factual narratives:

Comparing the crisis that was experienced and the crisis that is told would shed light on the tension between the totalizing and comprehensive designs of the discourse (which aims at controlling the principal event, at closing the gap created by the “crisis” or the “interference” of others) and the ethical designs, which require being faithful to what was experienced, and which consequently give up the idea of integrating the experience into a retrospective movement aimed at explaining or totalizing the story. (2008)

Explaining, making sense of the events may involve applying a kind of violence to their indeterminacy. This is, however, the mission of the journalist, and the journalist is entitled – or at least is supposed to be entitled – to do so thanks to the reporting process. The journalist can't explain everything, of course. But he/she can check facts, ask witnesses and experts how these facts connect, crosscheck what the interviewees say, etc. Most of the time the journalist is not directly involved in the events and can maintain some critical distance. These professional procedures are all designed to ensure the observance of journalism ethics. They should, however, be balanced against the temptation to over-interpret the events that Baroni stresses.

Even if it seems to better respect the underdetermined nature of life, the intriguing function may also raise ethical issues. The need to attract the reader, which American narrative journalists largely emphasize, answers a very basic ethical consideration: “draw[ing] readers into stories they might otherwise put aside, thereby bringing some truth to them that they would not have seen” (Craig 2006, 188) – “engaging readers” can thus be viewed as a way to “advance truth telling” (Craig 2006, 62). But playing with the reader’s emotions, or even encouraging their voyeuristic propensity, mainly for the sake of selling more copies, is another form of violence applied to the events. Moreover, leaving elements unexplained may be the result of bad reporting rather than of a wish to respect the indeterminacy of felt experience.

One function does not seem to be “more ethical” in its essence than the other, but there are different ways to use each function, defining different ethical stances. To fulfill its project, a journalistic narrative therefore seems to have to contain a plot where both functions are present and to find a way to balance them while also observing the ethics. How? At this point I wish to turn to some texts of narrative journalism in order to confront these theoretical considerations with some concrete examples.

4. Case studies

The three journalistic narratives studied in this article come from the “notable narratives” highlighted by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, one of the reference institutions in the field of narrative journalism in the United States.⁹ The three texts are part of a larger corpus that is currently being analyzed.¹⁰ They have been selected because they present different balances between the intriguing and the configuring functions, and different uses of each function, creating varying ethical stances.

4.1. Playing on the power of tension

The first narrative, “Fixing Mr. Fix-it,” is a five-part series by Diane Suchetka, published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in December 2008. It tells how a mechanic loses his arms in an accident at work, gets through major surgery to reattach them, and then struggles to get his life back. The first part, on which I focus most, presents the protagonist, Norm, and recounts the day of the accident up to the time when he arrives at the hospital.

“Fixing Mr. Fix-it,” the headline of the series, announces the theme but remains quite enigmatic for someone who has not yet read the article. The headline of the first part is more explicit: “Terrible injury begins personal, physical journey.” However, the most important information is not really detailed: *what* injury is this about and *who* is the victim? The article itself starts with a long

passage explaining the main headline by introducing the protagonist. But the *what* still remains vague:

Nobody calls him Mr. Fix-it. But they wouldn't argue with you if you did.

At least they wouldn't have back then, back before February, when the accident happened, back when Norman Martin still worked as a mechanic.

For 16 years, he put in 40 hours a week at EAB Truck Service, crawling down into the concrete pits and reaching into the underbellies of cement mixers and beer trucks, ambulances and school buses. [...]

Trucks weren't all he fixed. [...]

Then, on Feb. 29, the strangest day of the calendar, something happened that Norm Martin couldn't fix.

The journalist arouses the reader's interest through "a deliberate and temporary obfuscation of the representation" (Baroni 2007, 88) of the events. The use of the intriguing function is particularly obvious when she writes: "At least they wouldn't have back then, back before February, *when the accident happened*" and "Then, on Feb. 29, the strangest day of the calendar, *something happened that Norm Martin couldn't fix*" (my italics).

After this first long passage, Suchetka starts telling that day chronologically, but she delays the telling of the accident by detailing everything Norm did since he woke up:

He was up at 5:45 that morning, a little earlier than usual, so he could get to the bank to cash his paycheck. He slid his arms through the sleeves of his gray work shirt, the one with "Norm" stitched over the pocket. He zipped up his gray work pants, tied his boots.

As the time of the accident gets closer, the journalist insists on some dramatizing elements that increase the tension. For example, she writes:

Over the years, Norm had trained himself to listen for warnings. Guys in his business know how metal creaks and hydraulics groan the instant before they give way. Those sounds are a mechanic's canaries, telling him to run – to get out of the hole – before something goes wrong.

They weren't there that day.

Then Suchetka finally describes the accident from Norm's point of view, detailing each of his thoughts. This second passage ends with Norm thinking: "*Jeanie, Jessica, Jacob* [the names of his wife and two children]. *Who's going to take care of them now?*" The tension at this point is higher than ever, but the journalist suddenly changes the setting to tell the same events from the point of view of the receptionist who received the emergency call, then from the point of view of the paramedics who took care of Norm. This delays the rest of the events until the journalist reaches the point where the paramedics arrive and find Norm. But when the reader might think they are finally going to learn about Norm's arrival at the hospital and the doctor's prognosis, the departure of the ambulance is delayed by the search for Norm's arms, an episode that is also told in every detail. Eventually the ambulance arrives at the hospital, but this is the end of this first part of the series. In the final sentences Suchetka both increases the tension and nonetheless gives the reader some hope – thereby limiting the uncertainty:

When the guys looked up, they saw 20 doctors and nurses in surgical masks and gowns surrounding the bed, ready to go.

Norm saw them, too. [...]

He was going to die. He knew that for sure.

What he didn't know was that in the thousands of runs these four paramedics had made in their 76 years in the business, *none of them had ever been met in an emergency room by so many people waiting to save a guy's life.* (my italics)

Of course, the reader has a strong suspicion that Norm is somehow going to pull through – it is announced in both headlines, “*Fixing Mr. Fix-it*” and “*Terrible injury begins personal, physical journey*” (my italics), and implied in the fact that this is only the first episode of a five-part series. But I don't think this destroys the tension – just as knowing that, in most detective novels, the hero will in the end find out “who did it” doesn't destroy the tension either. At the end of this first part of the narrative it is still unclear how, when, and at what cost Norm will recover.

The intriguing function undoubtedly dominates in this first example of journalistic narrative. The journalist deliberately tells the story in a way that makes the reader experience a recreated tension. Not much information – in the traditional sense of the term – is provided: no statistics about accidents at work, nothing about safety measures and regulations in truck garages, etc. “Pure” information remains limited even in the other parts of the series, describing the surgery, Norm's slow recovery and the family's financial problems – all occasions to provide the reader with information on very different topics.¹¹ Suchetka doesn't try to explain or pinpoint the cause of the accident either. When she reveals – in the third part of the series – that Norm was wondering why it happened to him, she only notes that “[i]t was a question nobody could answer.”

The configuring function is present in the text, however, even in the headline: the nickname “Mr. Fix-it” constrains the way the reader will see Norm while, in fact, Suchetka acknowledges in the very first sentence that “[n]obody calls him Mr. Fix-it.” She nonetheless justifies this nickname in the long description of Norm, which emphasizes only his hard-working and generous character. In the last part of the series she tends to give the events the aura of a miracle: “‘The stars were aligned,’ says Patty Wilczewski, the trauma coordinator who helped Norm after paramedics rushed him into the emergency room.” Yet Norm's character remains the key to his recovery: “And, it wouldn't have happened if Norm wasn't so intent on making it happen.” The narrative ends with Norm's wish to help prevent other accidents at work – thus quickly stressing the public issue beyond the personal story. And the journalist concludes: “Nobody calls him Mr. Fix-it. But after all this, maybe they'll start.”

There are things that remain undetermined at the end of the narrative – not only why it happened to Norm, but also “who's to blame for what happened to him” (Part V). Nonetheless, the journalist seems to discard these questions – no one could say why it happened to Norm and it is up to lawyers to determine who is to blame. In the end, what is emphasized is the figure of a hero, an example for the community of readers through the values he embodies. There is not much ambiguity here: Norm can't be seen otherwise than as an exemplary figure. Beyond him, a public issue appears indirectly: safety at work.

But the reader is not provided with much information on this issue. Moreover, these two elements build on the configuring function, but also on the intriguing function: what makes the reader care about both the person and the issue more than in a traditional report is the long path the reader has to follow to get to the denouement.

From an ethical perspective the use of the intriguing function could be seen as a way to respect Norm's experience: recreating the indeterminacy of each moment of his experience gives the whole its true magnitude. However, one wonders whether all the details are really necessary to get a sense of what Norm went through or if they are mainly there to satisfy the voyeurism of the reader. Likewise, are all the delays really needed or are they a way to play on the reader's emotions, perhaps in order to make him buy the next issue of the newspaper?

The use of the configuring function questions the role of the journalist in narrative journalism: is it "enough" for a journalist to raise such an issue as safety at work without providing the reader with at least some information on this issue – beyond the particular accident that is told? And is it the journalist's role to narrow the sense of the events, casting Norm as a kind of perfect hero when he very likely also has faults and weaknesses, just like other people?

4.2. Sketching the bigger picture

"Facing life with a lethal gene," the second journalistic narrative taken as an example, was written by Amy Harmon and published in the *New York Times* on March 18, 2007. It is part of a larger project, "The DNA Age," investigating how genetic technology affects daily life. This narrative tells the story of a young woman who learns that she carries the gene for Huntington's disease, an incurable and lethal illness.

The headline, "Facing life with a lethal gene," refers to the lethality of the disease but without mentioning what disease it is. The first sentences put the reader directly into a powerful scene, without explanation:

The test, the counselor said, had come back positive.

Katharine Moser inhaled sharply. She thought she was as ready as anyone could be to face her genetic destiny. She had attended a genetic counseling session and visited a psychiatrist, as required by the clinic. She had undergone the recommended neurological exam. And yet, she realized in that moment, she had never expected to hear those words.

The journalist first captures the reader's attention by arousing their curiosity – what was the test about? – and by playing on suspense – how will Ms. Moser react? Only then does she start explaining the situation: "Ms. Moser was 23. It had taken her months to convince the clinic at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center in Manhattan that she wanted, at such a young age, to find out whether she carried the gene for Huntington's disease." At that point she gives a first description of the disease, then she explains what is at stake beyond the personal narrative:

Ms. Moser is part of a vanguard of people at risk for Huntington's who are choosing to learn early what their future holds. Facing their genetic heritage, they say, will help them decide how to live their lives.

Yet even as a raft of new DNA tests are revealing predispositions to all kinds of conditions, including breast cancer, depression and dementia, little is known about what it is like to live with such knowledge.

Harmon then goes back to the personal story, defining its own stakes in passing: "Ms. Moser was feeling her way, with perhaps the most definitive and disturbing verdict genetic testing has to offer. Anyone who carries the gene will inevitably develop Huntington's."

The narrative continues with Ms. Moser's reaction after she got the results, a flashback from her childhood to the moment she decided to take the test, and then her life during the two years that followed. Harmon thus partially delays what the reader expects to read, the events that followed the test, with the long flashback. There is also one occasion where Harmon plays on curiosity. In the very first part of the narrative, she writes: "But it was another year before Ms. Moser would realize that she could have less than 12 years until she showed symptoms." However, the reader only discovers how she realized this in the second last part of the text. With the exception of this, if there is tension in the rest of the narrative, it naturally arises from the events that are told – the two questions that drive the text being: how did Ms. Moser decide to be tested and what will her life be like after the test?

The configuring function is used throughout the narrative and integrated as much as possible into the story itself. For example, telling about Ms. Moser's job is the occasion to allow the reader to see, even briefly, the different stages of the disease and to learn more about it:

In each patient, she saw her future: the biophysicist slumped in his wheelchair, the refrigerator repairman inert in his bed, the onetime professional tennis player who floated through the common room, arms undulating in the startlingly graceful movements that had earned the disease its original name, "Huntington's chorea," from the Greek "to dance."

The journalist also provides information during the flashback. For instance:

But her [mother's] efforts to raise awareness soon foundered. Huntington's is a rare genetic disease, affecting about 30,000 people in the United States, with about 250,000 more at risk. Few people know what it is. Strangers assumed her father's unsteady walk, a frequent early symptom, meant he was drunk.

Another of Harmon's "tricks" is to provide an explanation, which could be rather dry, from the point of view of Ms. Moser and her friends: "The statistic, they knew, meant that half of those with her CAG number started showing symptoms after age 37. But it also meant that the other half started showing symptoms earlier."

As these examples show, the journalist uses the configuring function mainly to give the reader information that can help them broaden and deepen their understanding of the disease. She mostly concentrates on facts. She doesn't evaluate Ms. Moser's choice to be tested or her reactions after the test. At some point Ms. Moser is confronted with her mother in court. Her mother has been given guardianship of her young niece. Ms. Moser decides to tell the court that she is affected by Huntington's, which means that her mother is too

– something the mother doesn't know yet. This is a very delicate and debatable decision, but Harmon only gives the point of view of each, letting the reader decide what to think:

Ms. Moser did not believe that someone in the early stages of Huntington's should automatically be disqualified from taking care of a child. But her own rocky childhood had convinced her that Jillian would be better off with Ms. Maldonado. [...]

"It's a horrible illness," Ms. Moser's mother said, months later, gesturing to her husband. "Now he has a wife who has it. Did she think of him? Did she think of me? Who's going to marry her?"

There are only two passages where the journalist really seems to shape the sense of the events. In the first one it is rather clear: she both interprets and generalizes a particular reaction to the disease:

Her first session with a therapist *brought a chilling glimpse of how the disorder is viewed even by some who know plenty about it.* "She told me it was my moral and ethical obligation not to have children," Ms. Moser told Ms. Elio by cellphone as soon as she left the office, her voice breaking. (my italics)

The second passage sums up what Ms. Moser's decision to take the test really means in only two sentences: "Before the test, it was as if Ms. Moser had been balanced between parallel universes, one in which she would never get the disease and one in which she would. The test had made her whole." It is difficult, however, to know if it is the journalist or Ms. Moser herself who interprets the situation – and this clearly influences the role assumed by the journalist: schematically, reporter or interpreter.

The end of the narrative doesn't offer a clear-cut resolution to the complication – i.e. Ms. Moser learns that she carries the gene for Huntington's. Instead, it appears as the beginning of a denouement: Ms. Moser seems to start accepting the unbearable news she got in the very first sentence of the narrative and seems able to begin planning again.

As they turned into the driveway, Ms. Moser studied the semi-attached house next door. *Maybe* she would move in one day, as the Elios had proposed. Then, when she could no longer care for herself, they could put in a door.

First, though, she wanted to travel. She had heard of a job that would place her in different occupational therapy positions across the country every few months and was *planning* to apply.

"I'm *thinking* Hawaii first," she said.

Then they donned gloves, mixed grout in a large bucket of water and began the job. (my italics)

Nothing is really fixed; the uncertainty about Ms. Moser's future remains. The journalist doesn't try to escape it; instead, she emphasizes these doubts that persist beyond the narrative. The intriguing function is thus present, both through temporary and through more permanent uncertainties. Nonetheless, I would say that the configuring function dominates. On the one hand, the journalist rarely looks for tension – mostly only maintaining it when it naturally arises. On the other hand, she really tries to give the reader all the elements they need, both factual and more "experimental," to make sense of the situation and get a bigger picture, including not only knowledge about Huntington's disease, but also awareness of an important issue regarding DNA technology.

This particular way of using the two functions defines a very different ethical stance. The “light” use of the intriguing function may make the emotional power of the narrative weaker and the interest of the reader is perhaps less surely captured. But this strategy avoids playing unnecessarily with their emotions: the reader is told very early that Ms. Moser will get a lethal disease and that she might have only 12 years until it starts developing. Except for these two early statements and the flashback, Harmon maintains the chronology of the events, which can be seen as way to keep the reader’s interest in and respect for Ms. Moser’s experience, what she went through.

Ms. Moser’s personal experience is contextualized and enriched by the information the journalist inserts in the narrative. The journalist seems to allow the reader to build a larger and deeper understanding of the events but doesn’t help her sort out the more moral aspects of the situation. She thus positions herself in quite a conventional role for journalists: telling facts and letting the reader decide what to make of them.

4.3. Witnessing the indeterminacy of life

The third example is “The girl in the window,” a narrative written by Lane DeGregory and published in the *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) in July 2008. It tells how the police found a little girl who had been so neglected that she could be called a feral child. The text goes on to tell how she nonetheless found an adoptive family that fought to help her adapt to life.

The main headline, “The girl in the window,” is very enigmatic. Then comes the headline of the first part,¹² which starts explaining the *what*: “The feral child.” But the identity of the child is still unknown and the beginning of the narrative doesn’t make things clearer:

PLANT CITY – The family had lived in the rundown rental house for almost three years when someone first saw a child’s face in the window.

A little girl, pale, with dark eyes, lifted a dirty blanket above the broken glass and peered out, one neighbor remembered.

Everyone knew a woman lived in the house with her boyfriend and two adult sons. But they had never seen a child there, had never noticed anyone playing in the overgrown yard.

The girl looked young, 5 or 6, and thin. Too thin. Her cheeks seemed sunken; her eyes were lost.

The child stared into the square of sunlight, then slipped away.

Months went by. The face never reappeared.

Just before noon on July 13, 2005, a Plant City police car pulled up outside that shattered window.

This passage mostly plays on curiosity: who is this girl and what has happened to her? But the last sentence introduces some suspense: what are the police going to find? The next sentences increase this suspense as the policemen meet an investigator for the Florida Department of Children and Families outside the house. The investigator is sobbing in her car: “‘Unbelievable,’ she told Holste. ‘The worst I’ve ever seen.’” The policemen then enter the house and dis-

cover how everything is wrecked inside, with broken furniture, filth and roaches everywhere. The woman living there acknowledges that she has a daughter. Then one detective finally finds the child:

She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper.

The way the girl is described doesn't solve the tension. It rather revives the reader's curiosity and the journalist still plays on suspense when she writes "Radio ahead to Tampa General," the detective remembers telling his partner. *"If this child doesn't get to a hospital, she's not going to make it"* (my italics).

The intriguing function is thus absolutely central at the beginning of the narrative, playing on two kinds of temporary uncertainties. The rest of the narrative also incites readers to wonder about what has happened and what will happen. But this becomes less central whereas the configuring function starts playing a more important role.

DeGregory tries to get the reader as close as possible to what it could be like to be this child while also stressing that it is impossible to adopt her point of view:

She wouldn't make eye contact. She didn't react to heat or cold – or pain. The insertion of an IV needle elicited no reaction. She never cried. With a nurse holding her hands, she could stand and walk sideways on her toes, like a crab. She couldn't talk, didn't know how to nod yes or no. Once in a while she grunted.

She couldn't tell anyone what had happened, what was wrong, what hurt.

There are also long explanatory passages that attempt to deepen the reader's understanding of the experience that is described. For instance, the journalist describes in detail the medical and psychological state of the child:

She [the psychologist] said medical tests, brain scans, and vision, hearing and genetics checks found nothing wrong with the child. She wasn't deaf, wasn't autistic, had no physical ailments such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy. [...]

Armstrong called the girl's condition "environmental autism." Danielle had been deprived of interaction for so long, the doctor believed, that she had withdrawn into herself. [...]

Danielle's was "the most outrageous case of neglect I've ever seen."

The narrative also includes an entire section contextualizing the problem of feral children and listing other cases throughout history and literature: "The authorities had discovered the rarest and most pitiable of creatures: a feral child. The term is not a diagnosis. It comes from historic accounts – some fictional, some true – of children raised by animals and therefore not exposed to human nurturing."

In all these passages the journalist aims at giving the clearest possible picture of a situation that is very difficult to imagine. But as the two last excerpts show, she not only offers information, she also tells the reader how they should understand the situation: this is "the most outrageous case of neglect" and the girl is "the rarest and most pitiable of creatures."

Even so, the journalist doesn't clear up all uncertainties. The narrative raises deeper questions that are not totally answered at the end of the text. DeGregory even formulates these questions in the very first part of the narrative: "How could this have happened? What kind of mother would sit by year after year while her daughter languished in her own filth, starving and crawling with bugs? And why hadn't someone intervened?" It is only in the third and last part of the narrative, headlined "The mother," that the journalist comes back to these questions: "this unimaginable woman [the girl's natural mother] is out there somewhere, most likely still on probation, permanently unburdened of her daughter, and thinking – what? What can she possibly say? Nothing. Not a thing. But none of this makes any sense without her."

The last sentence explains why the journalist meets the mother and tells her version of the story. On the one hand, the journalist stresses the flaws of this version: "She says she took Danielle to the library and the park. 'I took her out for pizza. Once.' But she can't remember which library, which park or where they went for pizza." DeGregory also clearly dissociates herself from the mother's point of view: "Everything she says sounds like a plea, but for what? Understanding? Sympathy? She doesn't apologize. Far from it. She feels wronged."

On the other hand, DeGregory provides the mother's psychological evaluation ("She tended to blame her difficulties on circumstances while rationalizing her own actions," wrote psychologist Richard Enrico Spana) and her IQ ("Michelle's is 77, 'borderline range of intellectual ability"). She also describes her looking at the last picture of her child she has:

She reaches up and, with her finger, traces her daughter's face. "When I moved here," she says, "that was the first thing I hung."

She says she misses Danielle.

"Have you seen her?" Michelle asks. "Is she okay?"

This creates a complex image of the mother, and even if the journalist makes clear her opinion of the mother's behavior, she lets the reader make up their own mind about her as a person. In an interview, DeGregory said that she got very mixed reactions from readers: some hated the mother, others felt sorry for her.¹³

DeGregory also tells readers about previous investigations into this case, investigations that had led to nothing. But she doesn't start a crusade. She meets the regional director of the Florida Department of Children and Families and writes:

The aim, he said, is to keep the child with the parent, and try to help the parent get whatever services he or she might need. But Michelle refused help. And investigators might have felt they didn't have enough evidence to take Danielle, Cox said.

"I'm concerned, though, that no effort was made to interview the child," he said.

"If you have a 4-year-old who is unable to speak, that would raise a red flag to me. I'm not going to tell you this was okay. I don't know how it could have happened."

Once again there is no clear answer as to how this could have happened to the child. There is also a deep uncertainty about the girl's future, which raises another big issue, as one of the interviewees puts it in the text: "It makes you think about what does quality of life mean? What's the best we can hope for her? After all she's been through, is it just being safe?" The answer to these questions remains uncertain, even at the end of the narrative:

Is she okay?

Danielle is better than anyone dared hope. She has learned to look at people and let herself be held. She can chew ham. She can swim. She's tall and blond and has a little belly. She knows her name is Dani.

In her new room, she has a window she can look out of. When she wants to see outside, all she has to do is raise her arms and her dad is right behind her, waiting to pick her up.

It is really difficult to determine whether one function dominates in such a narrative. The intriguing function is central, playing both on temporary and more permanent uncertainties that are made explicit – and are even repeated – in the text. The reader is drawn into the text by curiosity and suspense, then incited to think about deeper issues. But the journalist also provides plenty of information to help make sense of this unimaginable case, sometimes even explicitly guiding the reader's interpretation. The reader gets as close as possible to a situation that no one can really describe. He or she approaches this situation through familiar comparisons, medical and psychological angles, and even through history and literature. The reader can have no doubts about the seriousness of the case, about the mother's responsibility, about the fact that it should have been prevented somehow. But it is up to the reader to decide who to blame or to pity, and why. And it is up to her or him to wonder: "what does quality of life mean?"

The ethical stance in this third example is therefore also different. The use of the intriguing function at the beginning of the text may raise the issue of the respect of the child's experience – especially since children are supposed to be more "protected" than adults, in journalism ethics: isn't the use of the intriguing function primarily a way to capture the reader's interest? But it could also be argued that the progressive introduction of the little girl helps the reader understand the extent of the abuse and thus, later on in the text, the extent of her difficulties in adapting to life.

The journalist provides a lot of information to help the reader get closer to the events, but she also tries to respect what is undetermined and complex in this story. She even encourages the reader to think about it. Sometimes, however, she clearly sets out her own convictions and sensitivities. This opens up a debate on the mission of journalists. Some may argue the journalist's inclusion of her own beliefs and feelings is a way to influence the reader's interpretation of the events, a way which goes beyond her mission to inform – all the more so since she expresses these convictions and sensitivities in a rather neutral way, avoiding the first person and other marks of subjectivity. Others may see such expression as proof of honesty and indeed, as part of what she ought to

tell – because the story is (supposed to have been) built on a long and thorough reporting process.

5. Conclusion

These three examples hint at what could be the common ground of all journalistic narratives: the close interaction between the two functions of narrative, the intriguing and the configuring functions.¹⁴ This idea has been suggested on the basis of a synthetic definition of journalistic narrative. Among the characteristics experts and practitioners most frequently list is the need to stir the reader's interest, in particular, through tension, and the wish to get at some kind of "human understanding" (Clark, quoted in Scanlan 2003). The former seems close to the reticent dynamics of most fictional narratives, which partially obscure their meaning until they reach their denouement – in other words, close to what Baroni identifies as the intriguing function of narrative. The latter appears to refer to the informative and explicative purpose of most factual narratives that aim, as much as they can, to make sense of real events – i.e. it refers to Baroni's configuring function. I therefore propose to consider journalistic narratives as an attempt to reconcile these two functions, both of which are at the core of their narrative project.

But as our three examples show, this common ground hides considerable differences. In each case the narrative offers varying balances between the two functions. Moreover, the role each function plays – or the way they are used – also varies, and not necessarily as one might expect. A narrative that largely uses temporary uncertainties to recreate a form of experience can nonetheless incline towards concordance through the way it shapes the events, even in its headline and its very first sentences. A very informative narrative about a rather dry topic such as science can be organized according to a plot and play on narrative tension. A narrative about a most outrageous story can allow some kind of nuance by respecting the complexity of people and life.

Furthermore, the different uses that can be made of each function have ethical implications – which seem particularly important, as these are *journalistic* narratives. A "theoretical" discussion of each function seemed to indicate that there is not one function that is *per se* "more ethical" than the other. The three examples presented once again tend to confirm the abstract considerations.¹⁵ When it emphasizes temporary uncertainties, the intriguing function helps the reader feel what was really experienced, but it can also become a way to manipulate the reader. When it stresses more permanent uncertainties, this same function seems to respect the ambiguity of life but it questions the journalist's role: when is it better to let the reader make up their own mind and when is the journalist required, by their duty towards the public, to step into their narrative? The same question arises regarding the use of the configuring function:

where does the journalist stop in their attempt to help the reader make sense of the story? And what information is needed in this process?

These are complex questions to which there is probably more than one valid answer – and my aim is not to provide these answers, only to raise the questions. The different ethical stances that the journalist can adopt in narrative journalism determine, or perhaps are determined by, different narrative projects. This could account for the diversity of narrative journalism and the difficulty to reach one definition that all experts and practitioners would share. Baroni's narratological framework, and especially the two functions of narrative that he defines, seem very useful to analyze this diversity – both of the narrative project and the ethical stance – in particular journalistic narratives. It could help practitioners become aware of what their writing choices imply, and that the different options they have, options which they may only consider from a literary point of view, are not all equivalent from an ethical perspective. Baroni's narratological framework could also provide scholars with new methods to analyze narrative journalism, and thereby go beyond the observations and definitions offered by practitioners and experts.

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¹ For example, Tom Wolfe (1973) lists four techniques: scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, third-person point of view, and status details. Norman Sims (2007), on the other hand, emphasizes character development, complicated structures, voice, and symbolism. Mark Kramer (1995) also mentions voice and structure, and adds the importance of style and stance.

² All the translations of French notions and quotations are mine.

³ This is most probably why Revaz, Pahud and Baroni use quotation marks – which I choose to keep in my translation – on the word *narrative*.

⁴ Revaz, Pahud and Baroni use the French term “*noeud*,” or knot, which forms a “better” couple with “*dénouement*.” But in English, narratologists prefer the term *complication*.

⁵ The concept of *plot* is quite polysemic, even within the field of narratology. I will only consider Baroni’s and Ricoeur’s conceptions of this notion here.

⁶ The distinction between “suspense” and “curiosity” was first introduced by Tzvetan Todorov (1971) and later developed by Meir Sternberg (1978).

⁷ The adjective “*intrigante*” refers to the French word for plot, *intrigue*. I choose to use the gerund form of the verb “to intrigue” in my translation, both to avoid the potentially negative connotation of “plotting” and because it seems to better capture the essence of this function, which is to puzzle the reader.

⁸ Baroni uses the term “*récit médiatique*” in a sense which is closer to Revaz’s conception of “narratives” in the press than to Lits’s notion. This is why I choose the translation “press ‘narrative.’”

⁹ The three narratives taken as examples – and many more – are available online: <http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/category/notable-narratives/>.

¹⁰ This corpus was assembled for my ongoing PhD research on the ethical issues of narrative journalism. It consists of American texts that are considered as particularly representative of what narrative journalism is, either by their author or by reference institutions such as the Nieman Foundation and the Poynter Institute.

¹¹ There are two graphics accompanying the article, one that illustrates the accident and the other the surgery. But this “information” is not part of the narrative itself.

¹² The narrative is divided in three parts but they were all published in the same issue.

¹³ I conducted the interview with Lane DeGregory at the *Tampa Bay Times*, in St. Petersburg, Florida, on March 1, 2013.

¹⁴ This seems to be confirmed in the first results of the analysis of the larger corpus. However, this corpus only consists of American texts. Narrative journalism also exists in other parts of the world and its definition may vary according to its cultural context – this is what John Bak and Bill Reynolds (2011) are convinced of for literary journalism.

¹⁵ The first results of the analysis of the larger corpus also seem to confirm this.