

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: LIT2012-0291

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

**ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**LIT2012-0291**

**Narrative Journalism in America  
and Russia**

**Svetlana Bozrikova**

**Post-graduate, Literature Chair**

**Balashov Institute of Saratov State University**

**Russia**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209  
Email: [info@atiner.gr](mailto:info@atiner.gr) URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.  
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the  
source is fully acknowledged.

**ISSN 2241-2891**

15/11/2012

## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Bozrikova, S. (2012) **“Narrative Journalism in America and Russia”**  
Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: LIT2012-0291.

## **Narrative Journalism in America and Russia<sup>1</sup>**

**Svetlana Bozrikova**  
**Post-graduate, Literature Chair**  
**Balashov Institute of Saratov State University**  
**Russia**

### **Abstract**

Narrative journalism is a phenomenon that has become very popular all over the world lately. Though scientists cannot agree on a definition of the concept ('literary journalism', 'immersion journalism', 'intimate journalism', 'factual fiction', etc) as well as on its nature (a genre, a subgenre, a form, a style, a method, etc), they concur in the main categories of journalistic narrative – the dramatic structure instead of 'the inverted pyramid', the literary prose style rather than the newspaper style, a deeply personal point of view. They also emphasize 'immersion' as a basic principle of research strategy.

The leader in producing high-quality journalistic narratives is the USA. Narrative articles are regularly published in *The New Yorker*, *the New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *the Atlantic Monthly*, etc. There are special journals, publishing just journalistic narratives – *Creative nonfiction*, *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*. There are also sites and forums for narrative journalists – *Nieman Storyboard*, *Brevity*, *Athlantic Unbound*; *Salon*, *Slate*, etc.

Notable narratives are rewarded with many prizes – *The Pulitzer Prize*, *The Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism*, *J. Anthony Lukas Prize Project*, *Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers*, etc.

Literary journalism is taught at many American Universities (there is even a special prize, which honours exceptional, in-depth reporting by students – *The Christopher J. Georges Award for Excellence in Student Journalism*). Master's degrees are offered, doctoral dissertations are completed.

International Association on Literary Journalism Studies (founded in 2006) holds annual conferences and publishes a scientific journal '*Literary Journalism Studies*'. Though the Association has 'international' status, most of research is done by American researchers.

### **Contact Information of Corresponding author:**

---

<sup>1</sup> The work is completed within the framework of the government contract with the Ministry of Education and Science

## Introduction

Narrative journalism is a phenomenon that has become very popular all over the world lately. Though scientists cannot agree on a definition of the concept ('literary journalism', 'immersion journalism', 'intimate journalism', 'factual fiction', etc) as well as on its nature (a genre, a subgenre, a form, a style, a method, etc), they concur in the main categories of journalistic narrative: the dramatic structure instead of 'the inverted pyramid', the literary prose style rather than the newspaper style, a deeply personal point of view. They also emphasize 'immersion' as a basic principle of research strategy<sup>1</sup>.

The leader in producing high-quality journalistic narratives is the USA. Narrative articles are regularly published in *The New Yorker*, *the New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *the Atlantic Monthly*, etc. There are special journals, publishing just journalistic narratives – *Creative nonfiction*, *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*. There are also sites and forums for narrative journalists – *Nieman Storyboard*, *Brevity*, *Athlantic Unbound*; *Salon*, *Slate*, etc.

Notable narratives are rewarded with many prizes – *The Pulitzer Prize*, *The Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism*, *J. Anthony Lukas Prize Project*, *Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers*, etc.

Literary journalism is taught at many American Universities (there is even a special prize, which honours exceptional, in-depth reporting by students – *The Christopher J. Georges Award for Excellence in Student Journalism*). Master's degrees are offered, doctoral dissertations are completed.

International Association on Literary Journalism Studies (founded in 2006) holds annual conferences and publishes a scientific journal '*Literary Journalism Studies*'. Though the Association has 'international' status, most of research is done by American researchers.

In Russia, narrative journalism has just starting developing. Natural processes of borrowing are taking place. That is why a lot of Russian journalistic narratives present copies (not always successful) of American texts. Nevertheless, good journalistic narratives are created in Russia too.

Now I would like to expand on some basic elements of journalistic narrative.

### *The key Components of a Journalistic Narrative*

As far as the form concerned, a journalistic narrative includes the following key components:

- *Dramatic structure*

Traditional journalistic texts, as a rule, have the 'inverted pyramid' structure – when the information is presented in descending order of importance. Journalistic narratives have the dramatic structure including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement. An essential characteristic of journalistic narratives is presenting information 'scene-by-scene'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scanlan, Ch., Banaszynski, J., French, T., Bragg, R., Wilkerson, I., Kramer, M., Talese, G. (2002). 'Sharing the secrets of fine narrative journalism. Panel discussion.' *Nieman Reports*. Available at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu> [10 May 2012]

- *Emotive language*

The language of traditional journalistic texts should be detached and unemotional, while the language of journalistic narratives – personal and emotional.

- *Point of view*

The author of a traditional journalistic text presents information in an unbiased manner. The author of a journalistic narrative describes events personally.

As far as the content concerned, the key category of narrative journalism is

- *Factuality*

Factuality of the described events makes it more affecting than a work of fiction, whereas the art form makes it more appealing than a newspaper article<sup>1</sup>. But journalistic narratives have a huge emotional impact on readers only on condition that they provide reliable information. That is why it is very important to realize that just a good exterior form does not make a good journalistic narrative; its power is in the inner form – in the degree of immersion and factuality.

### **Material and Methods**

Two true-crime narratives are analyzed in the paper: the first feature – ‘*Hannah and Andrew*’ – is written by an American journalist Pamela Colloff<sup>2</sup>, the second one – ‘*Мать-изувер забила скалкой четырёхлетнюю дочь*’ – is created by a Russian author Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya<sup>3</sup>. I focus attention on two main aspects – textual peculiarities of the journalistic narratives (an exterior form) and degree of factuality and immersion (an inner form).

### **Results and their Discussion**

Let me present the results of the analysis of the journalistic narratives mentioned above. First, I would like to comment on their textual peculiarities.

*Dramatic structure*

Pamela Colloff’s feature has the dramatic structure including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.

Exposition: Hanna’s life is shown in parallel with Andrew’s one.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharp, L. McGaffey. (2009) ‘Creative Nonfiction Illuminated: Cross-Disciplinary Spotlights’. PhD diss., the University Of Arizona

<sup>2</sup> Colloff, P. (2012) ‘Hannah and Andrew’. *Texas Monthly*. Available at: <http://www.texasmonthly.com/2012-01-01/feature2.php> [10 May 2012]

<sup>3</sup> Невмержицкая, О. (2010) ‘Мать-изувер забила скалкой четырёхлетнюю дочь’. *Криминал* 6 (614) Available at: <http://www.allkriminal.ru/614> [10 May 2012]

Andrew is a boy, who was put in foster care when he was two-and-a-half years old. His mother and father's parental rights were terminated soon after he turned three. The child is considered to be troubled because he hoards food and sometimes eats from the trash, and he throws intense temper tantrums when he is not given food.

Hannah Overton and her husband Larry Overton are missionaries. Hannah is pregnant with her fifth child, and she wants to adopt a child with disabilities or an older child who has been unable to find a permanent home.

Rising action: The Overtons adopt Andrew. They manage to come into emotional contact with him. But they cannot curtail Andrew's compulsive eating (he eats even inedible things) as well as they cannot cope with temper tantrums he throws when Hannah and Larry ration his food.

Hannah has got into an accident and has to spend several weeks in hospital. It affects Andrew, and his behavioral deviations get highly visible: temper tantrums become much stronger. After one of such temper tantrums, Hannah sprinkles some Zatarain's Creole Seasoning into a sippy cup of water, and gives this broth to Andrew, hoping that the taste alone will appease him. The broth makes the child sick. As time wears on, the symptoms grow troubling: his breathing becomes congested, and he becomes less and less responsive. The parents rush him to a nearby urgent care clinic. At the clinic, Andrew lapses into a coma, and dies.

Climax: Hannah is accused in killing her son and she is arrested. The court decides that the woman beat her adopted son (there were sores from scratching during temper tantrums), head injuries (the child beat his head against the wall in spasms of temper) and made Andrew eat salty seasoning as a punishment for disobedience. Hannah is sentenced to life imprisonment, which means separation from her other five children.

Falling action: it turns out that the prosecutor has not presented the jury some documents and witnesses, proving that Hannah tried to save the child, not to kill. The attorney is appealing the judgment.

Dénouement: though Hannah is in prison, there is a strong probability that she will get free from the accusation. Hannah's children are waiting for their mother and pray: '<...> I pray that you will bring Mom home soon'.

The true-crime narrative includes presenting information scene-by-scene. Scenes are given when the author wants to draw the reader's attention to an important event. For example, Pamela Colloff displays one of the strongest temper tantrums 'online' – in a scene form:

*'Andrew asked if he could have lunch, and Hannah told him that he needed to wait; Larry was bringing them something to eat, she explained, and he would be back in a few minutes.*

*Andrew flew into a rage. He defecated on the floor of his bedroom, then smeared feces on the bed, the dresser, and the walls.*

*Larry attempted to restore order upon his return, putting Andrew's soiled sheets in the garbage and hosing off the boy and his foam mattress in the backyard. While Larry tried to scrub down the bedroom, Andrew pulled his*



*sheets out of the trash several times, despite repeated warnings not to do so. Losing his patience, Larry took the sheets to the family's fire pit and burned them'.*

Immediately after this scene, there goes another one, where Larry Overton explains his behaviour to the journalist:

*“Not the brightest thing to do,” Larry conceded. “But I was frustrated. The sheets were filthy, and he was getting poop everywhere. I made sure that he saw that we had an identical set of Spider-Man sheets so he would calm down.”*

The true-crime story ‘Мать-изувер забила скалкой четырёхлетнюю дочь’ by Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya also has the dramatic structure including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.

Exposition: Veronika Khodyreva lives with her husband and two children. She is enervated with dissipation. The children are brought up by their father.

Rising action: Veronika Khodyreva leaves her husband and starts a new life with Gennady Dorofeyev, who she is pregnant from. The only element of her old life is her daughter Masha, whom Veronika took with her, and whom she considers to be a burden to her. The mother treats Masha cruelly. After the second child's birth, the hatred to the first child becomes stronger – Veronika forbids Masha to come to the baby-brother.

Climax: Masha comes to the baby's crib and strokes her brother's face. It infuriates Veronika, and she beats Masha cruelly as a punishment for disobedience. The punishment is so violent that the girl needs an emergent medical help to stay alive.

Falling action: Gennady Doropheev sees that Masha feels bad and calls for the doctor. But it is too late – several hours later, the girl dies.

Dénouement: Veronika Khodyreva is sentenced to twenty years in prison. She tries to contest the judge's decision, trying to lay the blame for the crime on her dead daughter, but in vain.

Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya's feature also includes scenes, when there is some sort of equivalence between a narrative segment and the narrated it represents. For example, the next scene illustrates how badly Veronika Khodyreva treated her daughter:

*“Машенька, будешь супчик кушать?” – Ирина Борисовна заглянула в спальню, где сидели Машенька и Вероника с младенцем.*

*“Буду!” – радостно вскочила малышка.*

*Но тут ее перехватила Вероника.*

*“Разве я разрешала тебе куда-то идти?!” – прорычала она.*

*Девочка испуганно съежилась, но бабушка решительно встала на ее защиту.*

*“Что ты за изувер такой?!” – набросилась она на невестку. – “Что, и покушать ребенка нельзя?!”*

*Ирина Борисовна все же увела Машеньку на кухню, но последнее слово осталось за Вероникой.*

*“Вернешься ты у меня еще обратно в спальню!” – с явной угрозой сказала она дочери, заглянув на кухню.’*

So, both journalistic narratives have dramatic structures, not ‘inverted pyramid’.

#### *Emotive language*

The language of ‘Hannah and Andrew’ is very emotional. Expressivity is mainly created with emphatic constructions (lexical and grammatical).

*‘Perplexed, Larry installed a baby monitor equipped with a video camera in the boys’ room so that he and Hannah could observe if Andrew was wandering into the kitchen at night. It was while watching the monitor that Hannah saw him trying to eat part of his foam mattress and paint off the wall.’*

In the first sentence we see the example of inversion (a grammatical emphatic construction) – putting the subordinate part of the sentence – participle II ‘perplexed’ – to the first place in order to emphasize it. In the second sentence we see the example of using the emphatic construction ‘it was ... that’ (a lexical emphatic construction) in order to add expressivity to the subordinate clause – the parents learnt that Andrew ate uneatable things not while talking to him or anything else, but while watching the video.

*‘Hannah did describe how she and Larry had at first tried to treat the boy’s symptoms themselves, often volunteering more information than the detective had asked for.’*

In this sentence, the author uses ‘emotional do’ (a grammatical emphatic construction) in order to stress that the Overtons were ready to collaborate with the investigation.

So, Pamela Colloff uses different devices to make her text emotional, bright and persuasive.

The language of Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya’s feature is also emotionally expressive. It is achieved by using syntactic expressive means, namely expressive punctuation devices. For instance, exclamation mark within brackets is employed to bring into focus the part of the narrative which the author considers to be shocking. In the following examples the journalist emphasizes the mother’s unspeakable cruelty towards her daughter with this punctuation device:

*‘После страшного избиения, выдержать которое под силу не каждому взрослому, Машенька еще три с половиной часа (!) простояла в углу – без слез, без крика, без жалоб...’*

*Эксперты насчитали на теле маленькой девочки 46 (!) следов от ударов’.*

Dots are used to give the impression of difficulty of speech, caused by big emotional suspense. Dots render emotionality in a very effective way when they are put not at the end, but in the middle of the sentence.

*‘В своей низости Вероника дошла до того, что вину за произошедшее попыталась свалить на... покойную четырехлетнюю крошку.*

*Вместо того чтобы познакомить четырехлетнюю дочку с маленьким братиком, Вероника категорически запретила ей даже приближаться к ребенку. <...> Войдя в спальню, Вероника буквально остолбенела от гнева: негодная девчонка стояла возле малыша. В одной руке она держала его пустышку, а пальцем второй руки... трогала его личико!’*

We can also see a wide usage of lexical and morphological expressive means. For instance, the author describes Veronika’s fury when she saw her elder daughter by the baby’s crib with help of the metaphor:

*‘Разъяренной фурией женщина метнулась на кухню, где схватила увесистую скалку’.*

In order to make pity for Masha stronger, the journalist, describing scoffs aimed at her, employs diminutive forms referring to the girl:

*‘... беспорядочные удары приходились куда придется – по голове, по спинке...’, ‘Выдохшись, истязательница отпустила свою маленькую жертву и велела ей идти в угол. Машенька же, одуревшая от побоев, на дрожащих ножках потопала на кухню’, ‘А потом робко шепнула маме, что у нее болит спинка и ручка’.*

So, Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya’s text is also written eloquently – she uses enough expressive means and stylistic devices to make the narrative bright and affective.

Thus, both features present emotional narratives about the children’s tragic deaths. Expressivity is created by using expressive means of different levels.

#### *Point of view*

Describing circumstances of Andrew’s death, Pamela Colloff is purposely subjective. She maintains the parents’ view considering that the child’s death was not forcible but accidental. Though we can also hear the voices of representatives of the other position, the most part of the narrative is given to the voices of defense. Even accusing facts are presented in such a manner that they defend the Overtons. For example, the author does not just put the nurse at the urgent care clinic Patricia Gonzalez’s evidence – Hannah was smirking as

the doctors tried to resuscitate the child – into the narrative. Presenting the other point of view, she mentions that Gonzalez testified from memory after nearly a year of negative media coverage.

*‘Patricia Gonzalez, a nurse at the urgent care clinic, told the jury that Hannah had not behaved like a panic-stricken parent and had “had a smile on her face” as she performed CPR on the boy. <...> Gonzalez had never made a statement to police and was testifying from memory after nearly a year’s worth of negative media coverage <...>’.*

Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya in her criminal feature maintains the child’s position and describes the circumstances of the girl’s death, accusing the mother of the tragic events. The negative attitude towards Veronika and pity for Mashenka is shown at different language levels. For example, the author’s position is reflected in the nomination of the characters – the mother is called *Ходырева, Вероника, женщина, мать, истязательница*, and the girl – *(бедная) Машенька, маленькая дочка, маленькая жертва, маленькая страдальца*.

So, both journalists do not try to present information impersonally, objectively – on the contrary, they are purposely subjective describing the events.

We can see that the analysis of the key components of the American and Russian criminal features shows that, from the point of view of the form, both texts satisfy the requirements of narrative journalism.

Now I would like to comment on the degree of factuality of the journalistic narratives and the author’s immersion.

I have already mentioned that a journalistic narrative has a bigger that a traditional journalistic text influence only if the reader is absolutely sure that everything presented in the story is nonfiction.

Trying to achieve the highest degree of factuality, American journalists often even break some ethical rules. For example, in order to immerse the reader into the world of the story, 47,6 % of American journalists consider acceptable using personal documents (letters, photographs, etc.) without their owners’ agreement, and only 4,9 % of Russian journalists consider it acceptable; 43,1 % of American journalists, against 1 % of Russian ones, think it normal to reveal the names of people which should not be uncovered in accordance with ethical rules (for example, the names of crime victims)<sup>1</sup>.

So, we can see that American journalists try to use all possible means to show the story ‘from inside’. Maybe, because of it their journalistic narratives are more heartfelt. Russian journalists follow ethical rules more precisely, not presenting or changing some information (for example, the names of people, cities, etc.) if moral law demands it. It is reflected in lower degree of factuality of their criminal features.

---

<sup>1</sup> Панкратов, В. (2003). *История зарубежной журналистики (Курс лекций)*. Ставрополь: СтавНИИГиМ.

Let me illustrate the given data with some examples from the narratives under analysis.

In order to create a maximum reliable feature “Hannah and Andrew”, Pamela Colloff immersed herself into the characters’ life for quite a long time. She even made herself one of the characters. Below are two examples where the journalist describes her visit to Hannah and Larry with children.

*‘Hannah and I discussed her case and the anguish that had consumed her following Andrew’s death. “I spent many nights beating myself up over ‘Could I have done this or could I have done that?’” Hannah told me, staring at her hands...’*

*‘As Larry stood in the kitchen and peeled potatoes, the kids—excited to have a visitor—showed me around their house, pointing out their favorite hiding places and the plaster cast of their footprints in the hallway, which includes the letter A for Andrew’.*

There are also a lot of extracts from interviews with event participants, extracts from different documents in the journalistic narrative.

Despite the narrative form and plenty of expressive means, the criminal feature is a factual text – all names, figure, etc. are real.

Oksana Nevmerzhitskaya immersed herself into the world of documents to create a reliable narrative – she put some extracts from the court verdict, interrogations, expert reviews, etc. into the text. However, we cannot say that the narrative is reliable enough. First, the author, in accordance with journalism ethics, does not call the real names of the participants of the events – she calls her characters with fictional names. Using made up names decreases the degree of reliability of the whole text – if the journalist changed some names, she could also change some unfavorable facts (we cannot find out the truth – there are no real people-characters). Second, the Russian journalist does not include herself as a character into the story. Though the author is subjective defending one of the parts, she still looks down on the situation, not from the participant’s point of view.

Thus, the analysis of the criminal features, written by an American and Russian journalists shows, that, as far as the form concerned, both American and Russian stories satisfy requirements of narrative journalism – the material is presented in accordance with a plot line, using fine language, from a personal point of view; as far as factuality concerned, the American feature is more reliable than the Russian one because the western journalist pays more attention to immersion and giving precise information.

### **Conclusion**

So, in my opinion, an important reason why today narrative journalism in Russia falls behind narrative journalism in America is as follows: a lot of Russian journalists concentrate mostly on textual peculiarities (which are just a

cover), forgetting about such essential categories as immersion and factuality (which, from my point of view, are the core of narrative journalism).