Contemporary Reportage and Its Vocabulary – Putting Taste into Words

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1. Introduction

The difference between a mediocre and an excellent reportage lies in the details. The details show the reporter's skills to feel the subject of the reportage, the essence, the beauty, the juice of the event, to grab these details and put them into words that describe best the atmosphere and facilitate the reader the mental participation at the event.

As French Journalism professor Michel Voirol precisely puts it into words,

> […] the aim of a reportage is to make the readers see, hear and feel what the reporter himself saw, heard or felt (Voirol 2001: 54-55).

Or, as German journalism professor Walter von La Roche explains,

> the journalist takes the reader to the spot, where he can see the things with the eyes of the reporter (von La Roche 1990: 62).

My proposal is to expand the definition: taking the reader by hand to the place of the event should mean, in my opinion, making the reader see, hear, smell, taste and touch what the reporter saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched at the spot. Therefore, this paper proposes a different approach from those so far, presenting new techniques for gathering and processing information

2. Using All the Senses in News Gathering

The reporter should include all his senses in the documentation phase and describe the information received through all her/his senses in the reportage.

In this way, the reporter can receive more and more valuable, distinctive or "juicier" information, details that can make a difference between a mediocre and an excellent reportage.

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The reporter (as author of a reportage) is continuously looking for details that tell a story, details that matter, that can add color to a text and at the same time testify for the authenticity of the text, underlining the quality of the reporter as an eye-witness of the event. Or, as William Howard Russell (the British reporter who wired the first modern reportage to "The London Times" from the site of the Crimean War, in 1854) put it so as to underline the essence of journalism:

> I shall proceed to describe, to the best of my power, what occurred under my own eyes, and to state the facts which I have heard from men whose veracity is unimpeachable, reserving to myself the right of private judgment in making public and in suppressing the details of what occurred on this memorable day [...] (Russell 1854).

This credo should not disappear even in our digital era. The quality of the articles published is still determined by the same criteria, although the freshness of information has long surpassed all others. In order that the readers can trust the written text, it has to be based on several principles of quality: the reality from which information is extracted and the professionalism of the source. Russell succeeds admirably, as he only relies on intuition, to synthesize these requirements. He prioritizes the first person; the reporter himself is attending a special event ("memorable day"), making the selection of information, engrafting his signature on the text therefore being responsible for what he wrote. The article is based on facts, whether first-hand information, collected from events that the reporter assisted at ("under my own eyes"), or information from reliable sources ("facts I have heard from men whose veracity is unimpeachable"). Erstwhile, the reporter reserves his/her right – in fact, it is a necessity – to select information ("the right of private judgment in making public and in suppressing the details"). The whole approach is part of the need to build a relationship of trust with its audience, hence its commitment ("to the best of my power").

As already underlined, the details can improve the quality of a reportage. The details should be numerous, but at the same time well chosen.

Including all our senses in the investigation widens the range of details perceived. The variety of stimuli gives a larger palette of details and sensations and contributes to a more complex and more vivid image of the event. If the reporter is skillful enough to choose these details and describe them, the reader has got more chances to actually feel that he is taken by hand to the spot in order to re-live the event.

These are the reasons for giving my plea: to be aware and able to include all our senses in the investigation process, finally to put these details perceived into words.

This might look simple, but it is in fact more difficult than it looks like. The simple reason is that we are used to see and hear, but still availing less of our other senses. The reasons vary from the fact that we perceive 80% of the information through sight, to cultural habits and inhibitions (for example, Europeans are less habituated to use the tactile sense than people from other cultures)**.**

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3. Immersing in Reportage

This paper is based on the experience at the course and seminar *Press Genres/The Reportage* I am teaching since 2007 for students of Journalism at the Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy and Communication Sciences, West University of Timişoara.

At the very first seminar, I proposed an experiment to the students (generations 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014).

They received the task to describe the seminar classroom with the eyes of a reporter, and they were not given any other directions. The aim of the experiment is to remove two common misconceptions. The first misconception is that the reportage is an essay. The reportage is only for the sake of figure of speech, "a story". But it is not just any story, but one told by journalists. Or, as formulated by German journalists and journalism professors Wolf Schneider and Paul-Josef Raue: "When writers tell a story, their texts become short stories or novels. When journalists tell a story, they write reportages" (Schneider, Raue 1998: 104). As highlighted by this definition, reporters do not use elements of fiction, reporters always go (even in the Internet age) on the spot in order to collect information. So it is a mistake to mistake the story for an essay. The second bias is that the reportage requires a large event or an exotic place to have a good story. One well-known contemporary author of reportages in Romania, Cornel Nistorescu, stressed this idea in an interview:

> Reporting can be done on a street corner, in a wagon, and a plane. Because a whole world lives at any spot, you just have to watch how it lives. [...] Only idiots will write only from the explosion at Hotel Inter. All fools want to write a story there. When life hits you with a sledgehammer, it's very easy to write an article about it. But the reportage means something more than the subject (Lupu 2006: 11).

The result of the experiment done with students was shocking: only 1% of students rose to approach things and discover interesting details describing the room; others assumed they know their classroom well enough and hardly looked up from the sheet of paper! The reasons may be very different: from shyness to convenience, from fear, to ignorance or prejudice that everything is already known.

On the other hand, especially on TV, we witness a different kind of journalists, the aggressive ones, especially when issues relate to the sphere of politics or prominences. But the reporter, as an author of reportage, is required to have a different attitude: he/she shouldn't be shy or aggressive. To write a story, journalists must be calm, in control and open.

I understand "openness" both as open-mindedness and as sense-usage. The purpose is to gather as many and varied information as possible. Using all the senses in news-gathering should grow the number and quality of information collected. In this paper I will try to prove this assertion on taste, one of the senses we are less used to talk about, often our descriptions don't reach beyond salty, sour, sweet and bitter.

Starting from this idea and repeating definitions of specialized Journalism textbooks I noticed some shortcomings: definitions emphasized only the use of the visual and auditory sense, other senses are not brought into discussion. All manuals emphasize observation and interviewing techniques as gathering information in order to create a story.

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The closest definition to what I try to emphasize in this paper is the one used by Michel Voirol, as I already pointed out in the beginning. The ingredients needed for a good story in Michel Voirol's eyes are

> characters with name, age, distinct expression or behavior, way of talking, etc.; words that transcribe direct style, dialogues; vivid scenes, anecdotes; colors, smells, noises; a scenery drawn with a few precise lines (Voirol 2001: 54).

Luminița Roșca speaks of "a plan of «staging»" in the report, and just enumerates the related details such as "visual effects, sound, smell or touch". The Romanian Journalism professor does not give, however, a more detailed view of how to manage this kind of information in the text (Roșca 2001: 76). Roșca highlights observation and interviewing, appealing to the sense of vision and its conjugation with the ear, in the main techniques for gathering information:

> There can be no story without details obtained through observation, the place and time of the event. If work is well targeted and effective observation exploited, it can supply information obtained through interviewing. It is clear however that the value of information is greater when they are obtained by combining the two methods mentioned: observation and interviewing (Roșca 1997: 57-58).

The reporter's eyes must indeed be very sharp as F. Brunea-Fox (the founding father of social reportage in the Romanian press) outlines in an interview:

> the reporter's eye is like the eye of a fly, a multiple eye. The reporter must have an eye also in the nape of his neck (Pop 1972: 7).

But again, I emphasize, in order to have a more vivid description of the event, other senses must contribute to the reporter's story.

4. Experiencing Taste

Since 2008 I also propose 3rd year Journalism students who attend my course in *Press Genres/The Reportage* a workshop to power up their senses, with a focus on taste.

The reason is that we are used to describe what we see and hear, but when it comes to describe information received by taste, we are lacking words (the same applies to information gathered by smell or touch). Our vocabulary needs improvement. I already showed how important details are for a reportage.

The aim is making the future journalists open up to more information and making them aware of other senses (in this case, the taste).

As means of investigation, I am using techniques inspired by child pedagogy (Waldorf, Montessori). Infants are being taught to use their senses and they are guided to take their first steps in this respect, but these means are also used to discover and to correct certain deficiencies. An example is an "odor rally" as described by Herbert Österreicher (1999), where the blindfolded child (it is important, because sight is the dominant sense) has to recognize different objects just by smell. I am also using techniques from a new branch of psychotherapy called "pleasure training", described by psychologist Beate Handler in her book *Mit allen Sinnen leben: Tägliches Genusstraining* (*Living with All the Senses: Daily Pleasure Training*) (3rd ed., 2012). Briefly, pleasure training is about a complex of techniques

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making the subject of psychotherapy aware of his/her senses with the aim of relaxation (e.g. it is used for subjects with ADHS or burnout syndrome). Today we are used to a bombardment of the senses with information of all kind and we are used to do several things at the same time (*e.g.* sitting in front of the computer, while listening to someone in the room talking to us and sipping our coffee) have to learn again to focus on one sense (and one activity). The subject is taught to re-find pleasure in little things like the color of the grass, the humming of the bees or the smell of a flower and to dwell into these seemingly trivial things in order to rediscover pleasure. In psychotherapy, this concludes to relaxation, in journalism the techniques can be used to get more and more interesting information.

The workshop I propose is structured into three parts.

The first step means describing the methods: explaining what *pleasure training* means in psychology and how its instruments can be used by journalists as a news-gathering technique.

In the second step, students get acquainted with a vocabulary we are not usually used to: describing taste is more difficult than it seems, because we are usually lacking the words that go beyond "sweet", "salty", "sour" or "bitter". We certainly do not find this vocabulary in regular reportages!

For this reason I am grabbing to culinary shows like Jamie Oliver's or Anthony Bourdain's – via YouTube. These specific two master chefs and show-masters were picked because of their loquacity, exuberance and continuous remarkable effort to describe the taste of the dishes.

Let me give you some taste of Jamie Oliver's dishes, when the show-master grabs to figures of speech:

> A lovely clean prawn […] a wonderful prawn […] a nice prawn, a beautiful prawn […] a nice salad – lovely, look at these fantastic colors a really fresh, healthy dish! It's absolutely fantastic: basil prawns, grilled zucchini, raw peas and beans and mint – brilliant! I absolutely love it! (Oliver 2012a).

Jamie Oliver manages to capture and keep the attention of his public with strong images, to give the impression of the taste or to give an impetus to try the recipe.

> I'm going to make a Bloody Mary to pick you up and put you back where you belong: rock-solid, but completely different to what I've done before, and it rocks the party, I'm telling you it rocks the party! (Oliver 2012b).

In order to succeed, Jamie Oliver's language comes close to language in advertising:

> For your perfect roast potatoes you need perfect potatoes. The consistency – this is where you want it to be, so, go for this, baby! Cut them into two, parboil for ten minutes, this will give you the beginning of the fluffy inside which is very important. […] See their outside, it is steaming, candy-flossy and it is going to make them super-crispy and that is a good thing! […] I've given you choices for flavorings. If you use the olive oil flavor you'll need to use good Italian oil; for sweeter potatoes with flavor off the charts, use butter. If you're going to indulge, go for goose fat. You get chewier, tastier edges and a kick-arse, turbo-charged flavor (Oliver 2012c).

Clearly, because the aim is persuasion:

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> It will be perfect delicious! Put in there one of the hero ingredients here in Spain, the olive oil, cherry vinegar… It's not just acid, it has a kind of flavor, it's a tiny bit of sweetness in there. […] In five minutes the flavor of that tomatoes, because of the beautiful things you put in there will be ridiculous! (Oliver 2011).

And, of course, to facilitate the reader to take part in his culinary experience:

> If you cook eggs too hard and too rushed you get this horrible crispness which we don't like. […] You want your omelette silky – delicious (Oliver 2009).

Analyzing the discourse of the two show-masters and master-chefs mentioned above we have found some of their marks:

- the use of comparisons, metaphors, enumerations and epithets to describe taste (useful for the reporters as well, these are the most common images in reportages, too, because they are describing);
- including memories in the description ("these roast potatoes – for me this is the taste of Christmas…") (again, this technique might be useful for a reporter; the sense of taste, like the smell, brings back memories, produce associations, so sometimes you have to describe the flavors, making a comparison or remembering something);
- a discourse close to the discourse of advertising with many superlatives, hyperbolas and climaxes (this is understandable for a TV-show, that has to sell itself, but it is not proper for a reportage in its classical, textbook sense).

This is the stage where I try to convince students that appealing to all the senses would lead to a more complex reportage, more beautiful and more successful. And information-gathering becomes also more fun, more like the work of a detective.

The second step of the workshop means tasting. Students are encouraged to bring something to eat or drink. Even plain water isn't plain, a piece of *giabatta* has a certain, unique kind of taste, different to a piece of *bauernbrot*, a Granny Smith apple tastes completely different than a Golden, but it is important that each student is not just a consumer, but that he/she reaches awareness of the taste.

Finally, students have to describe in a few sentences the taste, being as specific as they can and applying what they learned from the techniques used by the master-chefs and show-masters presented above. At this point, the workshop looks more like a creative writing workshop.

5. Conclusions

Describing taste in reportage can be useful in order to involve the reader more in the reporter's experience at the spot.

The difficulty lies in getting away from the simple sweet, sour, salty and bitter labels. The reporter has to find new ways to describe taste. We found that some culinary shows were a good source of inspiration for the description of the large variety of tastes.

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My recommendation to all who write reportage is to open up and use all the senses (*pleasure training* isn't just for therapy but can be very useful for journalists in order to gather information) and to describe all these different feelings in order to obtain a more qualitative reportage (one that takes the reader to the spot by all means).

Or, as I have put it in the forword of my own travel reportage book *Souvenirs*:

> You must get lost in a city, in order to take its pulse. You must not follow the map, but you must walk and feel the city, indulge yourself in it, immerse in the city life. […] You must smell the city. You must sit down and observe the people. You must feel the wind, the sunshine and also the rain. Because it rains differently in Hamburg or in Marseille. […] You must taste the city in its small things, take a baguette in France or a cappuccino in Italy. […] It doesn't necessarily have to be a repeated perception, it can be a singular one, but it should be then and there, when you are at the spot, because it belongs to understanding and communication (Ciortea-Neamțiu 2003: 8-9).

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Contemporary Reportage and Its Vocabulary – Putting Taste into Words

The difference between a good and a great reportage is marked by the details chosen to describe the event or situation. Getting colorful and meaningful details for reportage not only means a nose for information, but also good eyes and an open mind. The aim of this paper is to show that also other senses, apart from sight, should be involved in gathering the information. As pleasure training, a relatively new direction in psychotherapy suggests using all the senses, this can also be an useful instrument for a reporter to get more and probably more colorful details which can indeed "make the reader see, hear and feel what the reporter saw, heard and felt", using Michel Voirol's words. While sight and hearing are particularly involved in news gathering, taste is one of the senses often left aside. Not all subjects for reportage permit its use, but when it is the case, sometimes the reporter lacks the vocabulary to describe the feelings. What is the vocabulary used in such cases and how can it be extended are the questions raised by this paper, making it interesting not only for researchers, but also to journalism students and reporters.

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