

As It Happens:

Truth, Trust, and the Narrative Podcast.

Wenn einer eine Reise tut, so kann er was erzählen.

- Walter Benjamin, „Der Erzähler“

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1. Introduction

When Walter Benjamin wrote his 1936 essay „*Der Erzähler*,“ he could hardly have anticipated the contemporary storytelling boom. In his essay, Benjamin laments the disappearance of the *storyteller* – a person truly able to recount a tale –, whose downfall he considered inevitable due to the rise of the modernist novel. Today, he might find a cure to his grievances in contemporary journalism.

For a few decades now, storytelling has infiltrated newspapers, TV news, and radio (Kramer). We are no longer mainly confronted with the journalistic pendant of social realist writing: Objectivity.¹ The ideal of the truly objective news story is no more. The journalist, envisioned as a disinterested bystander, can safely be put to rest with all the other idealistic but ultimately unattainable illusions of the past. As communications professor Ralph Hanson puts it: “Objectivity for a journalist is a manner of presentation, a storytelling technique” (387). In other words, objectivity is not chiefly normative on the level of *what* is being told but of *how* it is being told. This notion has garnered widespread acceptance in the field of contemporary journalistic studies as well as in journalistic practice (Hanson 385), which gave way to a certain liberalization of the journalist. Open up, for example, any page of *The New Yorker* and you will virtually always find that fateful single letter that is also a word that is also a concept which had been shunned by journalistic conventions for decades: “I.”

¹ For further information on the influence of literature on journalism cf. Wolfe (31).

Journalists have made an entrance into their own stories and they are not likely to disappear any time soon.

As a result, the modern journalist might have more in common with Benjamin's ideal storyteller than any contemporary novelist. Within the field of journalism, nowhere does this ring as true as in the medium of the *podcast*. The enormous popularity of podcasts like *This American Life*, *Serial*, *Radiolab*, and *The Daily* has helped to crystallize this category into a form of media worthy of examination. In itself more of a formal medium than a genre, the term has become synonymous with a particular story-driven style of narration.

The Daily from *The New York Times* presents a salient example. It is produced by one of the most established news publications worldwide, has garnered millions of subscribers, and is one of the most popular podcasts even in Germany.² Yet, despite its success, scholars trying to keep up with an ever-evolving field are sometimes unsure what to even call this type of journalism.³ Judging by virtue of its subjects, *The Daily* is clearly news, but as to what format it is exactly, there is room for debate. Andy Mills, one of its producers, describes it as "more like an audio documentary" (Wichter), which is to say that it mainly relies on telling stories. There are countless examples to choose from, but take for demonstration the episode from May, 11th of 2018, "A Life-or-Death Crisis

² As of the 29th of August, 2018, *The Daily* has been at the top of the German iTunes charts for 359 days, for a full list refer to (iTunesCharts.net).

³ Owing to this ephemerality, I will draw on a variety of sources and texts for this paper; relying not only on academic papers, which take their due time, but also on newspaper articles, blogs and the like which are often able to provide a much faster reaction and critical engagement with elements of the news.

for Black Mothers,” which closely follows how journalist Linda Villarosa researched and experienced the story, event by event. Instead of being presented with facts and figures of an endemic problem in the American health care system, we follow one mother on her journey (The Daily, “A Life-or-Death Crisis for Black Mothers”).

So, what should we call this kind of story? Ira Glass, the creator and host of *This American Life*, has this to say: “It’s narrative journalism, is what it is. [...] I think you might be stuck with ‘narrative journalism’ if you want to call it something.” (Abel 11). The matter I am dealing with, namely *narrative journalism* in the medium of the podcast, is therefore called *narrative podcast*.

As with any format, the narrative podcast has, over the years, established a particular set of conventions and methods observable throughout the entire genre. My goal is to isolate these patterns and establish a narratological toolset for productive analysis of a narrative podcast. One particular concern is how a story that is based in factual events is to be told in a podcast.

As I will show, the interplay between story and reality relies heavily on one factor, common to all narrative podcasts: the host/author/producer/narrator; i.e. the *storyteller*. The storyteller is both an almost mythical figure and a very tangible real-life entity. This ambiguity gives the storyteller an appearance of authority as well as a fair amount of leeway in how a story is told. A clear understanding of these mechanisms is necessary to facilitate a critical reading of the medium in general.

Up until a few decades ago, news producers established trust by relying on an objective style of writing. With objectivity as a cure-all out of the way, more pressure lies with the news producers, the authors, to build a rapport that consumers of journalism feel they can trust. The main question I endeavor to answer is therefore what narratological methods can a producer of news utilize to establish him or herself as a trustworthy storyteller.

I will proceed by giving a brief overview of the genre's history, followed by an introduction into to the theoretic discourses I relied on while writing this thesis. Afterwards I provide an analysis of the idiosyncrasies of the narrative podcast that facilitate its intriguing relation to reality. I conclude this thesis by pointing out typical methods involved with storytelling in the narrative podcast, by attempting a close reading of some of the most emblematic parts of the podcast *S-Town*.

2. From Hipster to Mainstream: Podcasts

When I learned to make radio stories like the ones I make today, you could fit everyone who made these sorts of stories into a minivan. Now we're an army.

- Ira Glass (Abel ix)

Behold following relic: The book *Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production* is the go-to introduction to journalistic conventions of US public radio. The best and brightest minds of NPR, the *National Public Radio*, contributed to this near exhaustive guide of all things radio; “[T]he book is packed with best practices, professional secrets, and great examples” (Kern ix). This book was published in 2008. Then, podcasts were still such a novelty,

they warranted a mere three pages on the subject and not even qualified for an entry in the glossary. In 2018, at the time of writing, NPR's website lists a staggering 42 different podcasts from their own production (NPR).⁴

Comfortably reassured by hindsight, we can delight in the contents of one footnote in *Sound Reporting*: "Who knows whether this term – a portmanteau word combining 'broadcasting' with Apple's iPod – will survive?" (Kern 324). Survive it did. Another one of Kern's 2008 predictions, however, did come true: "Today the podcasting landscape is varied, vast, and growing; it may be unrecognizable in a decade" (Kern 324).

Certainly, the podcast app of your choice now offers access to a wide range of experimental and atypical stories and storytelling techniques. Still, most podcasts share a particular style of storytelling, which can be safely subsumed under the umbrella of the narrative podcast. The reason for that can be found in the origin of the podcast hype in the USA.

2.1. *This American Life*

If one had to trace back the origin of the narrative podcast to one show and person, one would invariably stumble across *This American Life* (TAL) and its creator Ira Glass (Mead). Originally launched in 1995 as a publicly-broadcasted radio show, it has since established itself as *the* storytelling authority through

⁴ To be clear: NPR is primarily a network of radio stations and also makes some of their radio shows available as a podcast post-broadcast. These, however, are not included in this list: The 42 podcasts are all produced straight-to-podcast and, while most of them will be aired on any number of US and international NPR member stations, have a very different set of production style and circumstances in comparison to live radio.

digitally transmitted podcasts. This is best demonstrated by how TAL, often personified through Ira Glass, has found its way into pop culture. Ira Glass has had cameos in TV series like *The Simpsons*⁵ and *BoJack Horseman* (“Your telephone is ringing. [...] Everyone has a story and your phone’s story is that it’s ringing.”).⁶ And, perhaps more importantly, TAL has been the subject of parody by the likes of *The Onion*^{7,8} and *Saturday Night Live*,⁹ which surely is testimony to TAL’s far reach. After all, satire depends on a shared frame of reference with its audience. The target of the joke therefore has to be expected to be widely known.

TAL’s influence can be felt in a great number of podcasts nowadays.¹⁰ From the immensely successful *The Daily* to NPR’s own *Invisibilia* or the independently produced design-podcast *99% Invisible*. They all share a style of storytelling that can be neatly traced back to TAL, be it the intimate narration or the scene-based approach, most techniques can be attributed to TAL in one form or another.

But, as with any craft, techniques evolve and conventions change over time. But just as you might find that both the surrealist and the impressionist painting have in common a sense of perspective or the stroke of a brush, all narrative podcasts have a few things in common. I want to discern the hidden

⁵ Cf. *This American Life*, “Simpsons”.

⁶ Cf. Arnold.

⁷ Cf. *The Onion*, “TAL Completed”.

⁸ Cf. *The Onion*, “Glass Exhausted”.

⁹ Cf. *This American Life*, “SNL”.

¹⁰ “His style of narrative journalism has really influenced a generation of storytellers,” said Steve Coll, dean of *Columbia Journalism School*, of Ira Glass, announcing him as the recipient of its prestigious award (Columbia Journalism School).

mechanics behind these narrative podcasts by looking at one piece of narrative journalism in particular: *S-Town*.

2.2. *S-Town*

TAL has served as a jumping point for many different producers and spin-offs. Alix Spiegel, for example, host of NPR's *Invisibilia*, has spent much of her career as a producer for TAL. *Serial*, hosted by TAL producer Sarah Koenig and, arguably, the most successful podcast to date,¹¹ also has its origins with TAL. Just like *Serial*, *ST* owes TAL not only its storytelling style but also the very microphones it was recorded on. *ST*'s genesis from TAL and its limited scope, compared with TAL's over 600 episodes, presents a compelling object of study.

S-Town (*ST*) is the story of producer Brian Reed's journey to "Shit-Town" a.k.a. Woodstock, Alabama per invitation of John B. McLemore, an eccentric horologist. Initially presented as the solving of an alleged murder case, *ST* eventually morphs into a portrait of McLemore and his peers in the deep American South, investigating the life and eventual suicide of McLemore.

ST started out as a regular story for TAL producer Brian Reed was working on (*ST* I 03:53).¹² *ST* is a limited series of seven episodes with a length of

¹¹ Exact numbers are hard to come by, as Nicholas Quah from the *Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University* writes (Quah, "Podcast Numbers"), but as of 2017, *Serial* counted 175 million downloads (AFP).

¹² While any written citations will always be extracted from the official transcript TAL has kindly provided me with (included in the appendix), the main authority on any quotes will always be the audio accompanying this thesis. In citations, the Roman Numeral succeeding "ST" refers to the chapter (i.e. episode), and the number after that refers to the minutes and seconds into the episode the quote can be found at. (Please note that due to different versions and in particular varying lengths of ads in different versions of *ST*, I cannot guarantee complete accuracy when referring to any other version of the podcast than the one included in the appendix.)

roughly one hour each. The entire series was published on the 28th of March 2017 for free. The fact that ST, demonstrably a team effort as per usual in this field, was produced by Brian Reed and Julie Snyder and edited by Ira Glass, Joel Lovell, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming, all of them representative of and highly influential to the field, make ST the perfect candidate for my endeavor.

ST is emblematic of the contemporary narratological movement that this thesis focusses on. Its immense popularity in its own right assures that ST's influence on the podcasting scene is an established fact.¹³ Additionally, the wide, varied, and controversial debate ST has sparked is testimony to its cultural influence.¹⁴ All of this is beneficial to the goal that my analysis of the techniques of ST be applicable as a heuristic tool not just for ST but for the field of narrative podcasts in general.

3. Theoretical Background

ST's creators are journalists in that they collect real information (as opposed to inventing stories) and, as the medium dictates, tape. But they are also authors, artistic agents, that take and rearrange the material they collected (Abel 113). In the decisions they make, they are influenced by conventions from both their own field as well as literary conventions; A set of what you could call rules emerges. But, as Dylan Keefe, the technical director of the podcast *Radiolab* puts

¹³ ST reached a record-breaking 40 million downloads within the first month (Quah, "S-Town Downloads"; Hess).

¹⁴ For an overview of the many discussions ST sparked, please refer to the according episode of *Pop Culture Happy Hour* (Holmes), the episode of *Still Processing*, courtesy of *The New York Times* (Morris and Wortham), and Aaron Bady's article on Hazlitt (Bady).

it: “I call the things I teach ‘rules’ and I believe in them wholeheartedly, but in the end, it’s really just a theory of journalism. If someone comes up with another theory, and that theory produces good radio, all the better” (Abel 134). At the same time, no one can escape the existing discourse. Either by reaffirming or negating it, any producer of any creative work moves within a field of references and conventions that were historically established.

Similarly, I am indebted to multiple, different academic discourses that provide me with the tools for my analysis. To illuminate this process, I want to give a quick overview of the theories I rely on the most.

3.1. Narratology

At its most basic, narratology is the question of *how* a story is told. While this does not imply dismissal of *what* is being told, narratology makes the argument that often how something is told is of greater importance to the reception of a piece of art than what is being told. Narratology allows us to take a look behind the surface of the text and look at the nuts and bolts that make up a piece of art.

In his 1928 book *Morphology of the Folktale*, the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp set out to create a set of classifications that allows the analyst to classify all common folktales. His argument was that essentially all stories rely on the same limited number of patterns; Propp attempted a universal approach, and thus, narratology was born.

Contemporary narratology is an incredibly diverse field and making out any resemblance to Propp’s foundational work requires a lot of squinting.

Structuralists have taken up Propp's approach and established their own theories of narratology, many of them so ubiquitous, school children everywhere, among them the author of these lines, equate literature studies with Genette's theories of focalization. As with many other fields of literature studies, narratology has been exposed to interdisciplinary influences; Film and theater studies have taken it up and adjusted it to their individual needs as have art critics and psychologists.

A thesis that looks at how someone tells a story, in this in case the podcast ST, will therefore inevitably be of narratological nature. In order to structure my analysis, I have chosen to rely heavily on the narratological approach established by the Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal in her book *Narratology*,¹⁵ whose very open concept of a narrative text proved very productive, in particular in interdisciplinary endeavors like this one. The following paragraph provides a good introduction into her conception of a narrative text:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and "colouring" of a *fabula*. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (Bal 5)

¹⁵ As Mieke Bal has done a heavy bit of revising of her own theory over the years, it is important to note that I am using the latest (4th) edition of her book.

Narratology, as Bal puts it, is a tool to understand, question, and critique anything loosely tangible around us: It offers a perspective on culture. “It cautions against the illusion of objectivity, both in storytelling as witnessing and in analysis as the scientific discovery of the truth.” We are perpetually surrounded by narrative; Constantly, we are being told stories and these stories are told from a particular vantage point, without exception. These are not intrinsically true or false, good or bad; Matters that narratology does not care about. “The point is, instead, to ask meaningful questions” (Bal xxi).

It is important to note, however, that narratology is always inherently created after the fact; It is a heuristic tool. Narratology is a means of analysis, not a guidebook on how to write a story or, in this case, go about when creating a narrative podcast. Authors, in most cases, do not – and, I would argue, should not – care about rules. At the same time, they are invariably influenced by what came before, by established conventions, which they can either abide by or ignore. Whatever the case, you can always employ narratology to ask meaningful questions.

3.2. Journalism Studies

The 1975 book *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965* was part of a larger movement in the field of journalistic studies: The movement to situate news within its cultural context. The British scholars Smith, Immerzi, and Blackwell analyzed archetypical newspaper articles between the years 1935 and 1965 to see how social change was interpreted by the popular press.

The book is essentially a tributary to the field of cultural studies and opened up the field of journalism to a much wider range of scrutiny. Thus, in line with the twilight of structuralism, which at this point must have seemed both very positivistic and somewhat dull, trendy post-structuralism swept over journalistic studies as it did with so many other academic disciplines.

This also meant that objectivity was no longer the prime impetus with regard to journalism. The emerging idea that signs always exist within a cultural frame of reference (courtesy of Derrida) and are always subject to interpretation by individual subjects also meant, the journalist could no longer be considered simply a conveyor of objective facts. In his introduction to *Paper Voices*, cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes:

Newspapers are not simply noisy channels which connect one end of an information exchange with another. They employ verbal, visual and typographic means for “making events and people in the news signify” for their readers. (Smith et al. 6)

In other words, a news article is not just someone presenting the world as-is. *There is always an agent*, whether obviously present through named authorship or clandestine and hidden behind the cipher of a news agency. Before any information reaches the consumer it is first situated in the agent's own frame of cultural reference and further adapted at the different stages of production. The more popular this view of journalism became, the more authors were able (or encouraged) to step out from behind the scenes.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Tracy Kidder recalls this development in his 1994 essay “Facts and the Nonfiction Writer”: “When I started writing non-

fiction a couple of decades ago there was an idea in the air, which for me had the force of a revelation: that all journalism was inevitably subjective” (14). Kidder reflects about his own development as a writer and his trials of finding a “voice.” He figured out in practice what others were doing in theory at the same time (cf. Hanson 385): Objectivity, or rather its appearance, was a formal matter, a mode of speech. It is but one tool among the vast toolset at the fingertips of the storyteller. This thesis therefore approaches journalistic questions of objectivity and truth narratologically.

4. Proof and Testimony

The nature of the narrative podcast makes for a couple of interesting circumstances that differ from consuming any other type of text. In the following, I want to outline some of the idiosyncrasies that go along with the listening of a podcast, specifically, ST. All of these change how we have to go about analyzing a podcast as opposed to what is more classically considered a literary text. This includes journalistic aspects, chief among them the fact that the story being told is – to the best of our knowledge and presented as – real, as well as aspects that pertain to the medium of sound and the accompanying claim of truth.

4.1. Ceci Est Une Pipe

In his essay *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes, more widely known for his essay *The Death of the Author*, writes about photography and its claim to truth. More so, he writes about our perception of a photograph as a product of reality:

“[L]ooking at a photograph, I inevitably include in my scrutiny the thought of that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye” (Barthes 78). The same thing can be transferred to a recording of audio.

When we listen to the many conversations Brian Reed has recorded with his subjects in ST, whatever the current context or situation, at its most basic, we are hearing evidence of something that happened. At this level it does not even matter, whether the situation is “authentic”; I.e. whether it was prompted by Brian Reed or not. Paraphrasing Barthes, the presence of the voice “(at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric” (Barthes 78). (This does not, as it may seem at first, stand in conflict with a post-structuralist reading, as the *signified* of the recorded voice as a *signifier* is still very much in flux.) The recorded voice attests that the situation was at one point reality. Barthes calls this quality “this-has-been.”

The photograph “*authenticates* the existence of a certain being” and Barthes wants to discover that being “completely, i.e., in its essence” (Barthes 107). In ST the dynamics are similar: Reed presents us the “this-has-been” of John B. McLemore. The recipient is invited, almost coaxed, to imagine the depth of that character’s life. Reed himself is not only privy to this, he is complicit, guilty of the same desire to find out more about McLemore and with Reed as a proxy, we get to go on this journey with him.

The authenticity of the situation is further promoted by what else we can make out in the sound recordings. The first half of the first chapter of ST is

comprised of Reed and McLemore talking on the phone until they finally meet, and we, by proxy of Reed, are presented with “proof” that everything McLemore has said reflects reality. This is eerily true, when McLemore first shows Reed the maze he has built in his back garden (ST I 27:50 – 29:04). Reed is astonished: “I’m like, I have chills.” The microphone witnessed this situation and through it, we are presented with the fact this situation happened. This is further consolidated by the sounds of them walking around the maze, McLemore opening and closing gates to rearrange the solution and their reaction when they realize, they trapped themselves inside the maze.

The “this-has-been” that is created by the medium underlies the entire show and the entire genre. It is true for recordings and interviews in TAL as it is true for any tape used in *The Daily*. It gives the listener confidence that we are experiencing this story as Reed is experiencing it.¹⁶

4.2. Welcome to the Real World

There is something else the evidence provided by the audio recordings does: It places listeners right in the world of the subjects we are hearing about. This world, as it happens, is shared between the subjects and the recipients of the story. This has an enhancing effect on what psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock dubbed *transportation theory*. In a number of experiments they

¹⁶ A glowing example of this is a two-part miniseries of *The Daily* that was aired on September 13th and 14th, 2018, called “Lost in the Storm.” It documents one family’s plight during Hurricane Harvey. The evidence of the “this-has-been” is consolidated by the usage of audio from Facebook Live videos the protagonist Wayne Dailey took as the situation was happening (*The Daily, Lost in the Storm*).

tested the different variables that affect the “feeling of being ‘lost’ in a story” (Green et al. 312; Green and Brock).

Successful transportation depends on successfully triggering the imagination of the recipient. Any description in a text is always also a call-to-action to the recipient to interpret and imagine a situation (Green et al. 320). They do not talk about radio specifically, but they suggest that film, as it already provides rich imagery to the viewer, might be less suited than books (Green et al. 312). Radio, I would argue, lies somewhere in between: On the one hand it limits the recipient's liberty to imagine what an interviewee sounds like, on the other hand it provides a rich atmosphere of sounds that can be at once very universal and very specific, which simply cannot be provided in the same way in books.

The empirical approach of Green et al. is perfectly complemented by communication theorist Ralph Hanson's engagement with the writings of the journalist Tom Wolfe. He identifies a few specific techniques as major characteristics of narrative realism, which are all major drivers of transportation into narrative worlds:

1. Scene-by-scene construction: telling the story through events rather than historical narrative.
2. Extensive use of dialogue: recording and reporting conversations in full.
3. Third-person point of view: telling the story through the eyes of a given character.
4. Including symbolic details: mentioning details that would only indicate the “status life” of individuals. (Hanson 390)

The use of these techniques prompts the reader to search for reference points from their own life. “For example, writers describing drunk scenes seldom try to describe the state of drunkenness itself. They count on the reader having been drunk at some time in his life,” Wolfe puts it (qtd. in Hanson 390).

All four of the points mentioned are important factors in any narrative podcast. ST employs all these techniques. This is demonstrated beautifully in the following scene: When Reed and McLemore first meet, they go the workshop, McLemore’s protégé Tyler Goodson in tow. They want to give Reed a gilded dime as a memento (ST I 42:40 – 44:50).¹⁷

We can hear them walk in, McLemore pouring potassium in a bucket, we can hear clattering, we can hear the dime being dropped into a bucket. Through the acoustics we can even infer what type of room they are in.¹⁸ All these and many more (“Tyler continues to sharpen the chainsaw.”) are perfect examples of minute details about the lives of McLemore and his peer (4).

(2) is a virtual no-brainer with this medium: All accounts, with the exception of Reed’s hosting are direct recordings.¹⁹

Utterances like McLemore’s “It smells like Chernobyl after the blast in here.” can be ascribed to (3) by means of (2). We can hear the actual account of that person in their particular point of view.

¹⁷ Paratextual side-note: The very same dime can be seen in an interview Brian Reed gave on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* from May 2nd, 2017 (Fallon).

¹⁸ This, like many other things, is picked up intuitively and unconsciously. This is simply natural to the medium.

¹⁹ What the conversation that actually took place looks like, I cannot discern, nor does it matter.

Lastly there is technique (1): Scenic episodes take precedence over historical narrative. This is true for the entire genre: TAL, ST, *Serial*, *The Daily* and their contemporaries all attempt to proximate a historical narrative by taking a scenic approach, as it were. While they often get to the bigger picture at some point, their strength lies in getting there via a relatable and personal account of individual events.

These four techniques and the specific limitations and liberties of the medium of sound make up the biggest strengths of the narrative podcast. As listeners, it is much easier to relate to specificities than generalities. Abiding by these principles guarantees a certain trustworthiness.

5. Who is Brian Reed?

Erfahrung, die von Mund zu Mund geht, ist die Quelle, aus der alle Erzähler geschöpft haben. Und unter denen, die Geschichte niedergeschrieben haben, sind es die Großen, deren Niederschrift sich am wenigsten von der Rede der vielen namenlosen Erzähler abhebt.

- Walter Benjamin (104)

The ideal storyteller, in Benjamin's eyes, is someone whose story told differs as little as possible from the spoken word of whoever told the story first. Naturally then, the narrative podcast is a prime example of this. Wherever viable, not only is the text in the story similar to that of the "nameless storyteller," it is identical because, to state the obvious, it is a recording. John B. McLemore is not only paraphrased or quoted in text, we can hear him speak as he spoke to Brian Reed. But, if Benjamin's interest lay in a story told as truthfully as possible, he might

still have his concerns. Because however truthful, first-hand and unmediated it may sometimes feel, there is always a modulator at play in any narrative podcast.²⁰

Brian Reed's recent celebrity aside (his wedding being reported on in *Vogue*), he also takes on the elusive role of the host. Hosts, in narrative podcasts, can take on multiple forms and slip in and out of different functions seamlessly.

Let me remind you of the trifecta Mieke Bal talks about in *Narratology: text, story, fabula*. The text in ST is the finished podcast product we are listening to. The story is the arrangement of events in a text. The fabula is the reality, a logical sequence of events that make up an imaginary world, only in ST of course, the world is not imaginary at all: The characters in ST share a world with its recipient, which makes for some interesting paratextual elements.

Reed appears in all of these different levels, as different versions of himself, which I will go into shortly. He also switches between focalizations depending on the situation by relying on a number of tricks, some of which are limited to the medium, others can be found in any type of narrative texts. They all add to the richness of the narrative, as Bal writes:

The complexities of narrative depend for their understanding and appreciation on the readers' ability to sense whose vision it is they are being presented with. This is why

²⁰ Let me briefly note an interesting outlier: The podcast *Radio Diaries*. Fashioning themselves to be telling "Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Life," they hand out recording equipment to various individuals. From the material these collect, the *Radio Diaries*-team then edits a podcast, without any additional narration or effects. This widely exceeds the scope of this thesis, but it would be incredibly interesting to do an analysis on the question of whether and how a narrator is still present in the podcast *Radio Diaries*. For further information cf. radiodiaries.org.

distinguishing between levels of focalization is the tool par excellence for generating the literary experience of narratives. (Bal 146)

While this and many other of Bal's remarks can be applied perfectly to ST, Bal's particular discourse that the author is different from the narrator presents an important caveat. Admittedly, an opposing view dismisses the entire discussion between Barthes and Foucault concerning the authority of the author to a text (Bal 60–62). Still, the unique boundaries of ST's relationship to truth, storytelling, fiction, and narrative make their approach unproductive. Notwithstanding the critical and philosophical recipient, this is how the majority of listeners perceive ST. This thesis instead willfully equates the person, author, narrator, and character Brian Reed.

5.1. Witness Marks

Whenever a certain character, both in the sense of the letter and the figure, appears, we are dealing with a situation with specific circumstances; I am referring to "I." It is the narrator appearing as an at least conceptually tangible entity, though not necessarily a character in the fabula. In the case of the narrative podcast, however, this is unlikely. In most cases we are dealing with an "I" that is also part of the fabula und functions as a *witness*. "The narrator as a witness is found in many literary, cinematic, and other narratives" (Bal 20). This agency then implies a claim to truth, at least in the eyes of the witness. The narrator can be identified as a specific character telling the story to an implied audience. Reed therefore functions not only as a the narrator and a character in

the fabula, he is also a surrogate for the believability of the story. We must assume that what he is telling us is the truth to the best of his knowledge.²¹

At the same time, he is telling a story. And like the witness marks on an antique clock, Reed leaves traces of what he has touched: The text, we have to remember, is a creation of an author (also Reed in this case). We are not presented with pristine facts; Reed modulates, interprets, and presents them to us. What follows, is a non-exhaustive list of all the methods he employs; Methods that are employed in all of the podcast world. As we will see, many of these borrow from literary techniques, hence making the story more entertaining as well as more relatable. In combination with the mentioned markers of the truth-value of the story these make up the essence of the narrative podcast: A story we can believe.

5.2. Host and Interviewer

The most important modifier is the distinction between the *host* Brian Reed (R-h) and the *interviewer* Brian Reed (R-i). The interviewer is Reed as he visits Woodstock, Alabama and discovers the story, piece by piece, microphone in hand. The host is Reed in the studio after the fact, telling us what happened. This is akin to the Romantic frame of a storyteller, sat by a campfire, telling a tale from their youth, commenting on their own story from time to time.

²¹ We can safely rule out an unreliable narrator, as this would directly contradict any journalistic integrity, which is still part of the field we are in.

Bal calls this “an indication to the reader” (Bal 57). While in this case, there is no explicit frame to the main story, the fact that we can infer that Reed is sitting in a studio somewhere already determines a number of factors: for one, we know Reed survives this story, we can also assume there will be certain premonitions to the development of the story from (R-h), as indeed there are (ST II 0:40; ST II 01:59; ST III 46:05).

As recipients we instinctively understand the difference between (R-h) and (R-i), even without making the intellectual distinction. This is true even in some of the more confusing variations: There are a number of cues from which we can read which Reed is currently talking to us. Among them are the sound quality of the voice (Reed in the studio (R-h) is much clearer and has a steady volume; (R-i) is usually “out in the field” and his voice changes accordingly), Reed’s intonation, the sound of the surroundings, the focalization, and simply the content.

Let us look at an example: When Reed finds out about the death of John McLemore at the beginning of the third chapter (notwithstanding a teaser/cliffhanger at the end of the second) we are confronted with an unusual situation (ST III 0:22 – 4:00): We are privy to a very traumatic situation that was unplanned by Reed, we therefore get what we have to assume is his actual and truthful reaction to finding out about John’s death. As Reed called because Tyler texted him, Reed called from the studio; The sound quality of his voice is therefore similar to that of (R-h), since in this instance both of them are speaking into professional microphones in an acoustically treated room. From 0:22 to

2:59, what we are actually hearing, is the conversation on the phone as it happened, featuring (R-i). We then hear (R-h) narrating the story from the future, even referring to himself in the situation: “Sitting in the studio [...] I [i.e. (R-i)] searched my inbox for the last message from [John].” At 03:07 we go back to (R-i) on the phone for one sentence and then at 03:17 we can hear (R-h) again, providing details about the previous utterance.

In all of these cases it is immediately clear, who is speaking at any given moment. For one, (R-i) is audibly distraught; Additionally (R-h) usually provides additional information or reflection of the situation. (R-h) knows more than (R-i) and while (R-i) is always an actor in the situation, (R-h) has all the agency in setting the tone and pace of the story, as is evident a few seconds later, when tropes of classical drama are used.

5.2.1. The Aside

While (R-i) finds out about McLemore’s death from Skyler, (R-h) starts giving an interpretation of the traumatic event. At one point, he gives us a look into (R-i)’s head, in an internally focalized monologue, that is reminiscent of the Shakespeare *aside* (ST III 03:22 – 03:46): “It’s Wednesday now, early evening. Just three days ago, John was alive [...]. I don’t know why we do this when we’re told someone has died.”

I am classifying this particular instance as an aside, because of the use of present tense. It is a short commentary of (R-h) on the state of (R-i). By using the present tense, the difference between the two states is understated: This is not (R-h) giving us insight from the future. Instead he consciously situates the

focalization within (R-i). Another example of this can be seen in chapter two, when (R-h) gives insight into (R-i)'s frustration at John's reaction to Reed solving the murder case (ST II 29:30 – 30:07).

5.2.2. The Soliloquy

There is another mode of (R-h), which is similar to the aside, but differs in one aspect: The focalization. Shortly after the previous aside, there is a sequence of over three minutes where (R-h) talks about John, but this time in a more general sense. He talks about statistics John sent him, supposedly emblematic of the impending apocalypse. (R-h) references how he cross-checked some of the statistics and gives a wider view on the subject. This focalization is that of (R-h) talking from the studio after the fact. I want to dub this type of sequence a *soliloquy*.²² It differs from the aside by focalization but also in terms of brevity. Keep in mind that both examples provided are sandwiched between parts of the same phone call with Skyler. The aside is used as a means of providing quick background information (like the current date) to the situation witnessed, while the soliloquy is a greater reflection on Reed's part, introducing new points and driving the story forward.

Certainly, the distinction is fluid, and let me reiterate that this is not meant as an unearthing of the thought process that went into the cited and similar sequences. It would be neither productive nor particularly interesting to provide

²² I am aware that both the aside and the soliloquy are being misrepresented here to some extent, as in their original drama context, whether there actors are on the stage and whether the audience is directly addressed factor into the definition. However, I think they both work here as a heuristic tool, which is why I chose this terminology.

you with guess-work as to what Reed's process or goal is. However that may be, in order to better understand, question, and talk about the format, we need a vocabulary to discuss these phenomena; This is my suggestion. But the narrative podcast does not only have formal idiosyncrasies to do with Reed's special status as a narrator, which is mostly to do with his relation to the text. I want to continue my investigation by looking at Reed's special status in relation to the fabula.

5.3. A Fly in the Soup

As stated previously, in narrative podcasts, the host will also be a character in the world of the story; The fabula. ST does this to an extreme: In fact the entire plot of *S-Town* is something of a non-story in that not that many events actually take place. Of the events that do occur, Reed is often an interested party or even an instigator. His status in the world of the fabula is often addressed, for example when Skyler says: "If you wasn't anything to this, I wouldn't have called" (ST III 8:50).

Reed's status in the lives of the people in the town of Woodstock bears resemblance to that of the *participant observer*. This qualitative data collection method has its roots in the field of cultural anthropology, where post-colonial reflection newly demanded that scientists actually go into the field themselves and adopt a more eye-level approach as opposed to the top-down practices colonial ethnologists used to take, in order to gather information: "In der Rolle des akzeptierten Fremden baut der Forscher Beziehungen zu Informanten auf, deren Lebensumstände er teilt" (Haller 141).

The anthropological community used to differentiate between an emic and an etic approach; wherein the former is defined by first-person descriptions by the group subjected to scientific research themselves; and the latter is comprised of descriptions by the anthropologists themselves, but from a standpoint of observation. Since the 1980s a more dialectical approach is hegemonic, which concludes that anthropologists, in dialogue with their subjects but also their own observations, are creating the reality they are researching; An on-brand post-structuralist approach (Haller 143).

The similarities between the anthropological fieldworker and Brian Reed are uncanny, which comes as no surprise since the work of the journalist resembles that of any other researcher: They all want to get information about a certain thing, person, or other subject. What is special in ST is that Reed, at least implicitly, presents himself in this way. This is also evident from ST's reception as such: An anthropological investigation of the South in the wake of the Trump election, which prompted VOX's Aja Romano to say of ST: "I'm not convinced it should have been made" (1).

Reed's intrusion into the lives of his subjects has certainly sparked controversy, but it is also the driving force of ST. The majority of chapter IV is comprised of Reed working through a list of people McLemore compiled, noting they should be contacted in the event of his demise (ST IV 19:30), which Reed subsequently does. In these situations it becomes obvious that Reed is not simply observing what is happening like the figurative fly on the wall; More like a fly in the soup, Reed is eliciting emotional responses from his subjects.

(INTERVIEWER) BRIAN REED: I was able—I went to the funeral. I was able to get to the funeral. It was right before.

(SUBJECT) ALLEN BEARDEN: You were? Well, you were better off than I was. I didn't find out until maybe a week and a half later. You know, I didn't really have a chance to say goodbye to him.

(INTERVIEWER) BRIAN REED: I'm sorry.

(SUBJECT) ALLEN BEARDEN: Yeah. (ST IV 28:40 – 28:59)

Allen then tells Reed to contact all the other people on the contact list, speculating that some of them might not have been told about McLemore's death at all, making Reed an active agent in the story. He calls Bill Maier (ST IV 35:40), who only then finds out about John's death. The same is true for Duncan Greig, another friend of John's (ST IV 37:07), as well as John's old chemistry professor (ST IV 38:00).

Reed's influence on the events taking place is particularly poignant, when it comes to Reta, John's cousin, who appears in Woodstock after John's death in order to take care of his bequest. The first time they meet is also the first time Reed references the podcast he is making: "She seems both surprised and confused by me, which is completely understandable. Your cousin drank cyanide and then a reporter shows up at court afterwards [...]. It's not the most normal sequence of events" (ST IV 9:30 – 9:45). A few months and an episode later, she calls him and implicates Reed in the proceedings of John's bequeathal, by asking him for information about Tyler Goodson and his relationship to John (ST V 15:00 – 22:00).

What I hope these sequences show, is the immense potential power the journalist holds in the narrative podcast. While he is able to appear as a disinterested host, amplified by the external focalization he often adopts, who is merely sharing with us a story – a certain arrangement of events in the fabula – we have to keep in mind that he is also part of the fabula himself, able to influence the very events he later arranges and produces the text out of. This raises questions about journalistic integrity but also about the nature of the story of narrative podcasts, an important factor to keep in mind when dealing with non-fiction.²³

5.3.1. Everything That Ever Was

Up to this point, the fabula of this story did not differ from the fabula in any work of fiction. Woodstock, Alabama, however is not an imaginary town and John B. McLemore, Tyler Goodson, and their families and peers are not imaginary people. The same is true for all narrative podcasts; The claim to reality is part of the definition. This has a number of implications to how narrative podcasts are understood and read.

Throughout ST there are many reminders of the fact that we are not dealing with a made-up story. In that sense, the fabula of ST is not a contained, abstract fabula we have to imagine behind the text. Instead, the fabula of ST is,

²³ One of the more extreme examples where a certain skepticism would have been advisable would be the 1958 Disney wildlife documentary portraying Lemmings committing mass suicide; a behavior that does not occur in the wild whatsoever. As it turns out, Lemmings were not even native to the area the documentary was filmed in and had to be imported (Snopes), for further information on the practices of manipulating the fabula in documentaries cf. "Manipulation" of *On the Media* (On The Media).

if we can call it that, our own fabula. It is discrete and literally extends to everything that ever was and will be. ST is not a portal into the imagination of an author but merely an account of the experiences of Brian Reed. If we wanted to, we could go to Woodstock ourselves, try to find McLemore's gold, or his grave, or talk to Tyler Goodson. In terms of worldbuilding, this is both a challenge as well as an opportunity. ST in itself is still a contained text with a limited scope, but by referencing the world ST shares with its recipients, reaching outside of the frame as it were, ST, as any other narrative podcast, can help oneself to any aspect of the vast narrative richness this world has to offer.

In the very first episode, when Reed references the first time he saw John's email "one day in late 2012" (ST I 03:30), Reed references ST's sister podcast TAL. This reference places ST within the recipients own lived reality, most of which are likely to have listened to or heard of TAL. The sentence also situates ST temporally, allowing recipients to crosscheck this time period in their own life, if they wish to do so. Shortly after that, John tells Reed the coordinates of his house, so Reed can look up the maze he has built (ST I 15:15). Reed then hides "a couple of coordinates here for John's privacy." This again reminds us that John lives in the same world as we do and exists (to our best knowledge at this point anyway, as we find out later that he will have been dead all along) outside of this story.

There are also references to bigger discourses happening outside of the scope of ST (ST II 07:05 – 09:10). When Reed encounters a group of white supremacists, he makes it clear how he feels about the situation: "I pretend to

do a number of things that make me feel uncomfortable in order to keep as low a profile as possible.” He goes on to tell us that his girlfriend, who is black, had insisted Reed set all his social media accounts to private. Reminding us again that Reed is an actor within the fabula but also of the fact that Reed exists outside the scope of ST.

Statements like these not only add a level of depth, they also give the story told additional authority and add a value of truth: If these facts can all be checked and assumed to be true, it must mean, we can safely assume all the other statements in the story are true. Emotional statements like these help us to better grasp the truth, which must be the eventual goal of any piece of narrative journalism. Ralph Hanson points this out: “The use of art (i.e. narrative) to present truth (i.e. objectivity) leads to a better understanding of truth” (393). The host of the narrative podcast, we can see, employs artistic methods, borrowed from literary genres to present reality. This evidently makes for more entertaining consumption but also creates ambiguity when we concern ourselves with how much liberty the host takes when it comes to dealing with facts.

5.3.2. Audience Participation

One last important consequence of the real world-aspect, is the possible involvement of listeners. Not so much an issue for ST, since all episodes were published at once. Its cousin *Serial*, however, had to deal with this on a large scale. Due to its immense popularity, details of the show were discussed on Reddit to excruciating detail; Altogether more than half a million people were

at least passively involved in the discussion. The social media response arguably influenced the content of the series, since staff members kept an eye on Reddit, according to their own account (BBC News).

This sort of listener-involvement has been taken to an extreme by the podcast *Trump, Inc.*, a cooperation of *WNYC Studios* and *ProPublica*, which actively asks listeners to do their own investigative work: “We’ll be laying out what we know, what we don’t and how you can help us fill in the gaps” (ProPublica). Interactivity, as Green et al. point out, can be a big factor in transportation: “Interactive media may be particularly transporting, and thus particularly enjoyable” (322). Developing a two-way relationship with an audience also establishes a close relationship of trust. Being able to claim ownership of just the smallest part of a finished product then extends this trust in your own part to the parts of your peers; Establishing a trustworthy rapport for the podcast as a whole.

6. In Conclusion

What remains is the question of (cultural) relevance, which I always advocate myself and others to ask. I want to begin to answer with a quote from *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*:

We are journalists – not scholars or poets, entertainers or advocates. In *The Times*, our goal is clear, precise, literate prose that effectively conveys important information to busy readers [...]. [T]he only time they should notice our writing at all is if, occasionally, they pause to admire it. (Siegal and Connolly vi)

The contradiction in this paragraph perfectly pinpoints the problem of objectivity in journalism. It is impossible not to notice the writing, speaking, photographing, or showing of information; The only way not to notice them would be not to see them. They all prerequisite an agent that has put the words, images, or stories there. Objectivity in journalism is an illusion.

Today, a new style of writing is on the rise. Yet, while journalists are expanding their toolbox and making use of new techniques, their goal has stayed the same: Effectively convey information. But instead of being able to rely on a supposedly objective style they have to find new ways to appeal to an audience. They have to appear trustworthy, but also relevant, interesting, and entertaining.

At a time when journalism is under intense public scrutiny, the journalists themselves are stepping forward. They themselves have become arbiters of truth and proxies for trustworthiness. *The Daily* provides intensely personalized glimpses into the lives and personalities of the journalists of *The New York Times*, as if to say: “Look, we are real people. You can trust us.”

The goal of this thesis is not to cast doubt on these journalists, nor to question their authority, or the truth value of their stories. But with a developing corpus of news, our understanding needs to develop as well. *S-Town* is an example of one of the ways a real story can be told. The methods it uses to establish trust with its listeners are many and intricate and subtle. All the more, it is important for us, as critical recipients of the news in general and the

narrative podcast in particular, to remember whence they came, and which intricacies pervade the medium.

This thesis is a small dent within the perpetual, and ever-evolving discussions that are being led daily in news rooms, in newspapers and online magazines, and in classrooms of critical thinkers. What I hope this thesis achieved, is to qualify me as one of them.

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