

The reflective gaze: epistemological contributions to literary journalism in the face of the meta-narrative illusion of the digital age

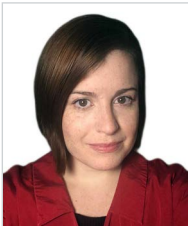
La mirada reflexiva, aportaciones epistemológicas al periodismo literario ante el espejismo del metarrelato de la era digital



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Abstract:

This article reflects on the epistemological contributions of ethnography to literary journalism. The objective is to incorporate the *reflective gaze* into the debate on literary journalism. It is argued that journalism based on a reflective gaze is a participatory exercise in which subjects, through an exercise of intersubjectivity, try to interpret, narrate and create a world in common. The exercise is dialogical. It is the result of active listening and the assumption that journalists are neither passive nor external to what they experience and narrate. The proposal radically changes the logics of hyper-simulation. It allows the community to appropriate the here and now and abandon the present continuous. The article argues that it is the function of literary journalism to be an alternative to the meta-narrative of accelerated capitalism in the digital age, and to highlight the illusion constructed on platforms by capitalism. The reflective gaze provides the epistemological framework to do this.

Keywords:

Literary Journalism; gaze; ethnography; reflexivity; reflective gaze; meta-narrative.

Resumen:

Este ensayo propone reflexionar en torno a los aportes epistemológicos que la etnografía hace al periodismo literario. El objetivo es incorporar a la discusión sobre el periodismo literario la mirada reflexiva. Se argumenta que un periodismo basado en una mirada reflexiva es un ejercicio participativo en el que los sujetos, mediante un ejercicio de intersubjetividad, intentan interpretar, narrar y crear un mundo común. El ejercicio es dialógico y es fruto de una escucha activa y de la asunción de que la periodista no es ni pasiva ni externa a aquello que vive y narra. La propuesta cambia radicalmente las lógicas de la hipersimulación: permite a la comunidad apropiarse del aquí y ahora y abandonar el presente continuo. En el texto se expone que es función del periodismo literario ser una alternativa al metarrelato del capitalismo acelerado de la era digital y de poner en evidencia el espejismo que construye el capitalismo en las plataformas. La mirada reflexiva ofrece el marco epistemológico para hacerlo.

Palabras clave:

Periodismo literario; mirada; etnografía; reflexividad; mirada reflexiva; metarrelato.

1. The world as representation: an introduction to intersubjectivity

If journalism is understood as a discipline involving the symbolic construction of societies, in the capitalist West (and throughout its area of influence) it is under threat. In fact, it is barely visible in the forest of digital communication. In the era of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020), the Western tradition of linear time (Heidegger (1986 [1927]) would refer to it as *vulgar time*) has allowed us to narrate the world¹. However, it has accelerated to such a degree, that we can affirm that we now live in a *present continuous* (Jameson, 1991). Temporality has been cancelled and we are allowed neither change nor transformation (nor anything constant). We cannot even correlate ourselves.

Furthermore, for at least three decades, capitalism has imposed a global simulation with a hyper-realistic appearance (Baudrillard, 1978). A *time without process* has forced us to represent the world by supplanting what is real by signs of what is real. Baudrillard defines this as an “operation of dissuasion with no real process due to its double standards” (1978: 7). In this global simulation, the *mass media* of industrial journalism has adopted a naive realistic perspective in its *praxis* (Bunge, 1985). It has been the main tool for spreading this deception of global dimensions. Therefore, little by little, it has lost its credibility. Vidal Castell (2020) states

1 We delimit the concept of ‘world’ to that which we can narrate. Wittgenstein (2009 [1921]: 107) writes: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. Logic fills the world; the limits of the world are also its limits.” Therefore, this world is not so much a set of objects that can be perceived through experience (and which Kant calls a phenomenon) but a totality of facts. Wittgenstein understands the *fact* that there is a perceived connection between objects. They are interrelated in a situation that contains all possibilities. For Wittgenstein, in the world of objects and facts the subject does not exist, because he himself “is a limit of the world” (2009 [1921]: 107). He even goes so far as to affirm that “the world and life are one and the same thing. I am my world. (The microcosm)” (2009 [1921]: 105). In the words of Garcés (2013), this common world is heading towards a de-structuring.

that it is not uncommon for this type of journalism to be based on a hyper-realistic aesthetical hoax as it responds to the interests of an industry that uses the notion of truth to recognise itself as the loudspeaker of hegemonic discourse.

Journalism that draws on this realistic-looking global simulation, as Vidal Castell (2002) clearly explains, believes that its narratives are truths that reflect an empirical reality. The journalist is (or aspires to be) objective and can capture the *empirical facts* as they are. Reality does not need any other explanation other than demonstrable facts. Therefore, this journalism does not consider language as a human intellectual apparatus that creates the world, as in giving it meaning. On the contrary, it considers it to be a mere automated tool that, if necessary, could be undertaken by a robot. This *unintentional communicator* (Martínez Albertos, 1983) would limit itself to collecting the fact and passing it on to the reader without cognitively intervening in the process.²

Due to this, and the fact that over the last decade the global simulation anticipated by Baudrillard (1978) has mutated into what we call hyper-simulation (Garde, 2021) (in which, through algorithmic language, surveillance capitalism has created a meta-story of planetary coherence that is embodied in the so-called platforms), journalism as a discipline has been weakened to such an extent that doubt has been cast on its ability as an *empalabradora*³ (Duch, 2009). In the global simulation, *mass media* serves up this narrative of *empirical reality* for capitalism to quantify. If this is the case, the meta-story only serves an economic interest. Therefore, the reliable duplication of the empirical truth, expertly delivered by the *mass media*, ceases to make sense. Likewise, the capitalist business of truth (Vidal Castell, 2020) increasingly subordinates the knowledge of language through the domain of a computational neo-language. As Ed Finn (2018) recalls, in the professions that make their living from articulating the world, this computational neo-language now has magical, spell-like powers. So, in the end, journalism is now represented on social networks and platforms as something repetitive and it cannot interpellate.

In the context of the rise of hyper-simulated capitalism, it seems pertinent to ask ourselves how journalism can rethink its community role⁴ and its role in the construction of possible communities. We understand that when journalists are working, they cannot capture reality as it is. Rather, at best, they capture *Kantian* phenomena. At worst, they capture material action in an abstract time and space constructed by convention (Schopenhauer, 2016 [1819]). We can only perceive this workmanship (Chillón, 2014) as intuitions guided by our sensitivity and our understanding. From this subjectivist roots perspective, the representation (a mere appearance, a metaphor (Nietzsche, 2010 [1896])) will not be more than an interpretation, a vision of one's own world, and it will never be a faithful copy of reality. Therefore, the representation will have a mimetic character (Ricoeur, 1996 [1985]). It will have a resemblance and will need intersubjectivity to be achieve it. This vision is necessary as a creator of meaning in a community.

2 Such naive realism in linguistics is meaningless, since, as pragmatists have explained, using language is fundamental to recognizing and making intentions known (Marín Jorge, 1993: 14). In fact, the naive realist matrix of epistemology has even questioned phenomenological realisms such as those of Mario Bunge (1985).

3 Lluís Duch proposes the neologism *empalabrar* which refers to human linguistic ability. It is something structural and an integral part of a person. However, this capacity only manifests itself in a spatial-temporal context. *Empalabrar* is to shape a world, to give it meaning and to enable it to exist.

4 Every time journalism experiences an epistemological crisis, the links between journalism and ethnography emerge, especially in American academia. Examples include: the crisis that journalism experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that resulted in proposals such as those of the *muckrakers*; and the narrative crisis involving the Great Depression of the 1930s in the USA. So-called New Journalism originated in the 1960s. It is not the subject of this article, but we cannot fail to mention the impetus of literary journalism with an ethnographic sensitivity in Ibero-America stemming from the 2008 journalistic credibility crisis. The Gabriel García Márquez New Ibero-American Journalism Foundation (now the Gabo Foundation) played a fundamental role.

We are aware that within our academic field, reflections on literary journalism have, until now, primarily focused on connections with literature. Specifically, they have centred on the use of literary resources traditionally used in novels, to construct factitious narratives (Chillón, 2014). To this debate, we want to add an epistemological contribution from the field of ethnography. We consider that ethnography (both as a methodology and as a method⁵) strengthens the contributions of literary journalism in portraying our time and space. With regards to the critical construction and deconstruction of the gaze, it is thanks to the principle of reflexivity.

So-called literary journalism (whose characteristics include, among others, *“immersion reporting, accuracy, careful structuring, and a lot of labour, no matter what medium is used”* (Sims, 2009: 13)) is the one that is the best approximation of this perspective. This is debated below. We also point out that contributions from ethnography, with regards to the concept of reflexivity, contribute to the key methodological debates for understanding the scope of literary journalism.

We cannot consider literary journalism as a distinct school of journalism nor even a movement. Nor can we restrict it to a single discipline. We propose understanding it as a trend comprising a heterogeneous set of works and authors that share four characteristics. We consider these essential to our proposal: a) they look at social and cultural diversity (Pujadas, et. Al, 2010); b) they incorporate their own literary resources into their narratives; c) the proposals emerge from an open rejection of what Albert Chillón describes as *“techniques, routines and dominant forms of conventional media”* (2014: 297) and, d) it situates fieldwork⁶ as a fundamental pillar of an intersubjective proposal to build a common world, that is only possible though a subject (author) and in interaction with other subjects and for other subjects.

Our objective is not to assimilate ethnography into literary journalism: they are different forms of knowledge that respond to different objectives. The purpose of this article is to enrich the reflection on literary journalism by visibilising the links with ethnography and highlighting the contributions that ethnography can make to literary journalism.

The era of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2018) and surveillance weakens journalism. We consider that the ethnographic epistemological debate around reflexivity provides interesting ideas. It helps us to appreciate how journalists position themselves (or should position themselves) in relation to what they write and about the people they write about. It also helps us to understand how they *empalabrar* what they have learnt, i.e., how they convert their interpretation into a public discourse through narratives that convey cultural stories.

The use of ethnography as a qualitative research methodology was developed by British social anthropology, American cultural anthropology, and the Chicago School of Sociology. We will use the term ethnography⁷ to refer to the qualitative methodology that develops theories through exhaustive fieldwork. This involves the deployment of immersive techniques for the description of human groups in their daily lives, i.e., direct experience. Ethnography enables participation *“in the daily life of a culture (near or*

5 While the methodology is a general strategy comprising specific methods, the method must be understood as a set of analytical systems that will allow advances in knowledge (Rizo, 2010).

6 Guber's approach to fieldwork is interesting with regards to subjective and contingent decisions: *“It is not a geographical space which is an area that defines itself by its natural limits (sea, jungle, streets, walls). Rather, it is a decision of the researcher who is covering areas and actors. It is contingent on primary data which is the information that the researcher converts into usable research material”* (2005: 48).

7 It is not the objective of this article to delve into ethnographic typologies such as auto-ethnography or public ethnography and their specific links with literary journalism. Gillespie (2012) and many other authors have written about the subject

far) to observe, to record, and to access another person's point of view, and then to write about what has been gathered" (Augé, 2005: 87). It allows us to participate in people's lives, to observe what happens, to listen to what is said, and to ask questions in order to collect experiences that help us to better understand a particular topic (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994: 15).

In this article, we attempt to theorize about what we refer to as 'the reflective gaze' through the fertile relationship between literary journalism and ethnography. This notion helps us to rethink the intentions, attitudes and emotions that journalists use in their work. It also allows us to rethink journalism and, therefore, authorship. Through positivist postulates, academia has established some truths about how to approach the task of narrating (or representing) the world. These truths can be challenged.

2. Links between ethnography and literary journalism: a comparative approach

To address our proposal (a theoretical academic article about the contributions of ethnography to literary journalism), a critical reading of concepts related to journalism such as representation, gaze, *empalabrar* was carried out following a bibliographic survey. The proposal arose further to a comparison exercise between authors who have linked literary journalism and ethnography. To understand the solid foundations sustaining the methodological links, we need to refer to the work of Chillón (2014) which draws on both linguistic relativism and phenomenological realism. The School of Bellaterra author coined the concept of the *factitious word*. It explains how journalists do not narrate objective empirical facts. Rather, they narrate "facts that are interpretations, from beginning to end: plots of meaning that feed on the obvious, the verifiable, the probable and the plausible [...] interspersed with fiction" (Chillón, 2014: 125). A certain academic tradition, with positivist roots, has defended (and continues to defend) the contrary position.

According to Chillón, the word *fiction* should not be understood as an involuntary deception or deliberate lie, but rather as the "imaginative procedure without which it is not possible to establish the meaning of what happens, beyond the obvious" (Chillón, 2014: 125). For this reason, among others, the author proposes the notion of the *factitious word* as an alternative to non-fiction locution, which he considers crude. "Whether scientific or journalistic, legal or historiographic, testimonial or documentary, the best expressions of faction lack the ability to objectively reproduce what happened. This is despite what is said (either frivolously, naively or unconsciously) as they cannot be anything other than representations: mimesis makes virtually present what has already happened in the past. This is done through a mediation (linguistic, rhetorical or narrative) inherent in any of the discourses of truthful intention" (Chillón, 2014: 70).

In this article it is accepted that when we analyse a *factitious* discourse, it will be a credible discourse that will have been written with a truthful intention. It will be verifiable in so much that it is shared by a community as an "institutional fact" (Chillón, 2014: 123). It is a framework of meaning about a cultural and linguistic warp that constitutes what Garcés (2013) refers to as the *common world*.

Neither anthropology or journalism have ignored the links between literary journalism and ethnography. There are many academics who, using both anthropological and journalistic theory, have evidenced the existing bridges between the two (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004; Bird, 2005; Gillespie, 2012; Grindal and Rhodes, 1987; Hermann, 2017; Angulo, 2014; Squeaky, 2014). Some authors point to a significant *blurring* between ethnography and journalism. Elizabeth Bird, for example, states

that their objectives are similar enough for training in ethnographic methods to be “*a loyal way to broaden the horizons and the richness of journalistic practice*” (2005: 307).

Gillespie (2012) suggests four aspects that link ethnography and literary journalism: a) both involve long-term immersive work that begins with obtaining the permission of the subjects to observe their daily lives and to interact with them; b) the texts must be truthful and credible; c) the focus is usually on ordinary people; and d) both use literary devices to generate coherent stories for an audience. With regards to this last point, we point out that there is a difference: literary journalism aspires to be popular, while ethnography has an academic audience.

Wolcott (1999) argues that, although ethnography is not a clearly defined method itself, a central and unifying principle of all ethnographic work is a commitment to cultural interpretation. Ethnography involves a long-term immersion in the daily lives of a group of people with the intention of “describing and understanding a social life from the perspective of the people who participate in it” Wolcott (1999). Literary journalism and ethnography thus share an interest in otherness. Otherness is understood, as Krotz (1994) stated, as something that is born from permanent cultural contact which seeks to capture human phenomenon in order to understand it and convert it into words.

If we start with the fact that both have their origin in travel writing⁸, we will also be able to understand why ethnography and literary journalism share immersive research fieldwork techniques. Techniques such as observation or interviews allow us to reconstruct the meaning that the social world has for people. We can also observe, first-hand, how that meaning is apprehended as a mobilizer that carries out actions.

In fact, when visibilising links, it is fair to remember that ethnography played a fundamental role in late 19th century journalism in the USA⁹. Similarly, the rise of ethnography in academia cannot be understood if we do not acknowledge that many academics were previously journalists. Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the Chicago School and a promoter of urban sociology, was

8 We refer to the travel books that proliferated in Europe from the 16th century onwards, with special mention to the books of 18th and 19th century female travellers such as Mary Kingsley (1862-1900), Isabella Bird (1831-1904), Margaret Fountaine (1862-1940) and Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858). We also mention the 19th century travel journalism of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Mark Twain* (1835-1910), who was one of its main representatives.

9 The *muckrakers* appeared in the last two decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th century as a semi-organized group of journalists (Filler, 1993). Following on from the work of North American naturalists, they denounced political corruption and poor democratic *praxis* in the industrial cities of the USA, a nation that was awakening (Vidal Castell, 2016). They also swam against the tide. When a story was no longer headline news, they carried out a thorough investigation. They consulted multiple sources, verified the information and published it with the objective of denouncing non-functioning aspects of the North American system. One of their visible leaders was Lincoln Steffens. He went so far as saying that, for him, the key question was no longer the what. It was the why and the how of what had happened. To understand this trend, we must understand that these journalists undertook fieldwork in the context of *institutional facts* (they returned to places where there was news) and the narrative became important. *Muckrakers* emerged while mass media in the USA was being consolidated (journalism was becoming an industrial business and the journalist, a worker (Vidal Castell, 2000)) and magazines needed to change their business model. *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Masses* among other, would be the spaces where the *muckrakers* would publish works such as *The Shame of the Cities* (1904). In this, Steffens denounced the municipal corruption of St. Louis, Philadelphia, New York, Pittsburgh and Chicago. David Graham Phillips published *The Treason of Senate* in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, a compilation of reports that forced President Roosevelt to pass laws such as the Pure Food and Drugs Act. Edwin Markham denounced child labour exploitation in *Children in Bondage* (1914) and Ida Tarbell exposed the speculative nature of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company in *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904). Between 1905 and 1906, Samuel Hopkins Adams published a series of reports in *Collier's Weekly* about the sale of drugs dangerous to health under the title *The Great American Fraud*. In fact, the *muckrakers* continued the work started by journalists such as Nellie Bly. After writing stories about normal people for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, in 1887 she was hired by Pulitzer to work for *The New York World*. When Bly worked for Pulitzer, there were posters on the walls of the newspaper announcing the change in the journalistic approach: “*The colour - the facts - the colour*” along with “*Accuracy - accuracy - accuracy*”. For Pulitzer, Bly wrote *Ten Days in the Asylum*, after pretending to be insane and spending ten days in a psychiatric facility.

a journalist¹⁰ between 1887 and 1898 before dedicating himself to academia. Park began his career as a newspaper reporter in Minneapolis, Detroit, Denver, New York, and Chicago. This link with journalism, which influenced his later work in the field of sociology, is evidenced when Park affirms that a sociologist must be “a kind of super-reporter, like the men who write for *Fortune* ... reporting on the long-term trends which record what is actually going on rather than what, on the surface, merely seems to be going on.” The Chicago sociologists who would ethnographically record the transformations that were taking place in large American cities, either practiced journalism or had a close relationship with journalists (Lindner, 1997).

In our opinion, this is how ethnography utilises the three verbs (go, live it and tell it) which Gabriel García Márquez used to define journalism (Gayà Morlà, 2015). Going implies going to look for *institutional facts* in the community. Living it involves deploying an immersive method that, through presence and an awareness of this presence, allows you to move from experience to understanding. Telling it involves making a cultural interpretation (a representation) of what has been lived in order to create common narratives. These convey shared stories in order to visibilise what is unseen due it being hidden or the fact it is no longer seen because of its ubiquity.

Narrations that are structured around a subjective point of view were summarized by Geertz though the expression *saying something about something* (1973). Once again, we understand this as a link between ethnography and journalism. It is the presence in the communities and the interaction with the subjects that makes it possible to pass from mere anecdote to category. Another important link between them is what, in anthropology, is known as dense description (Geertz, 1973). This recognizes marks of distinction. Study subjects use these to classify their environment, and they understand and attribute a sense of the world to interpret these marks. At the same time, a discourse is generated about what is happening and about human action. In journalism, Fleta Monzón (2015) used the concept of *dense gaze*, proposed by Vidal Castell (2008)¹¹, “as an antidote to interpretive superficiality, which goes beyond appearance, stereotype and mere data to try to find deep elements of human understanding that allow more intense and improved knowledge” (2015: 55).

A recent example of the blurred boundaries between the two disciplines which build *factitious* narratives, is that of the first female journalist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. According to a statement by the Swedish academy in 2016, Svetlana Alexievich was given the award “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and bravery in our time.” In 2016, reflecting on the need to undertake quality journalism in the digital age, David Vidal Castell and Laia Seró Moreno asked her about her method of working. While not naming the ethnographic approach, she implied it and replied:

It takes me seven to ten years to write a book and I talk to between 500 and 700 people. When I meet people with very interesting stories, I visit them five or seven more times. You can imagine how many notes I have [...]. I don't exactly do an interview when I'm talking to a person. It's more of a chat. We begin by talking about life, just like two people in the world who have met by chance. Every one of us is part of an era, of events. We are witnesses to our time, our hopes and utopias. We talk about everything: about serious things, but also about the blouse that you're wearing or if you've burned yourself making a cake. It's at this moment when the essence of a human being appears. You must be a very simple person and you must not be afraid to ask when you don't understand

10 The Universidad de Chicago website features Park's *muckraker* past: <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/university-chicago-centennial-catalogues/university-chicago-faculty-centennial-view/robert-e-park-1864-1944-sociology/>

11 Vidal Castell proposes, from the field of linguistic relativism, linking the notion of the *reflective gaze* that in this article we theorize through an ethnographic approach.

something, or you don't know anything about it. Neither should you be judgemental, as we all have things that have not gone well in our lives (Vidal Castell and Seró Moreno, 2016).

As the horseback riding *muckrakers* did in the 19th and 20th centuries and as the so-called *new journalists*¹² did in the 1960s, journalists create circumstances (go, listen, ask, experience, i.e., live them). They utilise literary resources to narrate what has been apprehended. Therefore, the *factitious word* becomes the key tool for a narrative that interprets the subjective world of the people with whom one has dialogued, empathized, and accumulated common experiences. It is also a guarantee of having been there, as a source of verisimilitude and credibility for one's readers. In summary, as aforementioned, the *factitious word* is a way of generating knowledge that visibilises the invisible.

For all these reasons, we assume that the *factitious word* (being plausible, credible and shared by a community) needs a second-order reflection process (where journalists transparently question their way of looking, their practice and even what they find) with regards to what the three actions (go, live and tell) imply for journalism. At this point, we believe that we should reflect on the principle of reflexivity that comes from ethnography. We will attempt to theorise this in the following section.

2.1. Contributions to literary journalism: the reflective gaze based on the principle of ethnographic reflexivity

Before expanding on the notion of reflexivity and how it can help journalists to situate their *praxis*, it seems pertinent to recall the thirteen points referred to by the journalist Leila Guerriero (2010). They describe the pillars on which narrative journalism is based. In this article, we consider narrative journalism to be synonymous with literary journalism.

1. Utilise resources from fiction to tell a true story and use an attractive architectural structure as found in a good novel.
2. Construction is based on the art of looking.
3. It is the opposite of objectivity - it is looking, a vision of the world, an honest subjectivity. Every piece of journalism is an edition of reality.
4. To see, you do not just have to be there. To see, you must become invisible.
5. Only by staying do you know, and only by knowing do you understand, and only by understanding do you begin to see. It is only when you start to see that you can tell the story.
6. In this new form of journalism, the work unit is no longer just the data, but the scene.
7. You must have something to say.

12 With regards to the links between journalism and literature, there are some notable precursors prior to the 1960s (Hersey's *Hiroshima* being a clear example). However, it was in that decade that the movement known as New Journalism emerged in the USA. In this movement, the links between journalism, literature and ethnography took on a special meaning. The works of Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese, among others, are wonderful examples of journalism that immersed itself wherever things were happening (Wolfe, 1973). It made description and everyday dialogue two of its most powerful weapons. Norman Mailer, Joe McGinnis and Barbara L. Goldsmith also wrote about what they saw with ethnographic sensibility utilizing the narrative resources typical of the naturalistic movements of the late 19th century. New Journalism articles were warmly welcomed by magazines specializing in social and cultural affairs including *Esquire*, *New York*, *Ramparts*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *Harper's Magazine*, as well as others such as *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice* that were established as part of the era's counterculture. However, it is worth mentioning that literary journalism in the 1960s also appeared in the form of books written by the very same reporters including Gay Talese, Terry Southern and Hunter S. Thompson. Even though they advocated a dramatic alternative to traditional journalistic methods, such was the impact of the new journalists that well-established newspapers also published some of their articles.

8. You must know the reality that is to be narrated. Know what you are talking about.
9. You must discover the best way to tell the story.
10. It is an instrument to think, create and help. The journalist writes to produce an effect.
11. Write about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances and extraordinary people in ordinary circumstances.
12. The key to narrative journalism is that talking about others tells us about ourselves.
13. Of all the fiction resources that journalism can use, there is one that is forbidden: the resource of invention.

Points 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 12 lead on to the following questions: What does the art of looking mean? How does literary journalism approach the subjective world of the people and the communities with whom it engages? What does this approach imply? How can the subjective worlds of these people contribute, through journalistic narratives, to building a common world? What role do journalists assume for themselves and how do they play it? These are all questions that literary journalists have answered –sometimes by intuition, sometimes through journalistic experience (Kapuscinsky, 2003; Terzani 2006; Guerriero, 2010; Salcedo Ramos, 2011). For this reason, we believe it may be necessary to recover the academic tradition based around ethnographic reflexivity. We consider that it is a fundamental base for literary journalism that makes fieldwork (the experience of presence) the main engine of reflective action.

Ethnographic reflexivity is so useful to literary journalism that Cramer and McDevitt (2004) propose putting an “ethnographic journalism” into practice. We do not think it necessary to assume the nomenclature of these authors, since we understand that all literary journalism starts from an ethnographic sensibility. However, we agree with how they explain reflexivity applied to literary journalism: *“This reflexivity requires that reporters become self-conscious about their social locations in relation to the individuals and groups they write about. Autonomous reporters would realize that to pursue ethnographic journalism, they must in some ways transcend not only professional conventions and reporting habits but also their own demographic profiles”* (2004: 131).

In this sense, the principle of reflexivity gives an increasingly clear awareness of the risk involved in *objectifying* people and cultures. In addition, it warns us against imposing the subjective world of the author on the experiences of others. Therefore, we must emphasize that the principle of reflexivity supposes a rethinking of the form and the manner of producing knowledge while distancing ourselves from positivist positions. The starting point of reflexivity implies considering the existence of a common world narrated by *institutional facts*. It implies interacting, observing and participating intersubjectively with a community in certain spatial-temporal circumstances. By understanding this, the journalist, while there, can be considered as part of the world which is being studied (Amegeiras, 2006: 115). They can understand, articulate and visibilise the humanity that we share from their specific standpoint. Restrepo (2012) expressed it as follows: *“There is a common element [between the journalist and the people they write for]: humanity. If you lose that humanity, you are drifting. You must speak to a public that is united by their human condition. Therefore, you must humanise your content.”*

We understand that, in order to advance reflection, we must first consider the notion of the gaze (one of the substrates that nourishes literary journalism (Angulo, 2014; Chillón, 2014; Vidal Castell, 2020)). We must link it with the concept of reflexivity and develop what we have termed here the *reflective gaze*. In journalistic practice, the gaze has been defined more as the intention of the author than as a methodology. However, most authors of so-called literary journalism do develop a more complex approach

with different angles. Angulo, for example, addresses the issue of the gaze and the chronicler's gaze (which in this article we will consider literary journalists) beyond simple intention. She writes:

Chroniclers use their gaze more intensely than their pens or their keyboards. They know what to look at. They know how to look. But saying 'look' is not saying much, because 'looking' is not seeing, it is thinking. It is centring, focusing and framing. Looking is also listening, it is not hearing. It is turning off a voice for the real protagonists to be heard. Looking is considering the sides without losing sight of what is in front –predicting the future and looking back from time to time. Looking is documenting and reporting, entering the lives of strangers by *zooming in*, and taking an overview by *zooming out*. [...] Looking is not criticising the times: past, present and future. Looking is translating. It is perceiving spaces, considering the dead angle, what is not on the field of play, the liminal, the fissure. Looking is counting on these spatial-temporal variables, when it appears that day to day blindness is ever more common due to a saturation of information (Angulo, 2013: 7).

Therefore, we must specify that the gaze is inherent in the construction of the narrated world. It is constructed “from methods of observation, description and analysis; uses technical and conceptual instruments that configure and reconfigure the way of seeing the world. The image is the product of a look at the world. Ethnographic research generally uses the word to represent social reality and the ethnographer's experience” (Ardèvol, 1994: 8). In the same way, Rosana Guber (2005) refers to the ethnographic process as “opening the gaze i.e., perceptual sensitivity, the capacity for surprise and perplexity, and also opening the senses, relativizing certainties and giving access to new definitions and perspectives.” She writes:

Fieldwork implies a passage from general reflexivity towards the reflexivity of those who participate in a work situation in their role as a researcher. It is valid for all individuals as social beings. However, this passage is not merely sequential, i.e., a researcher does not access and know their own reflexivity prior to accessing that of the informants. Their own reflexivity, when contrasted with that of the subjects studied, is redefined and finds a new place. With regards to a level of knowledge, it is very likely that researchers will know more about their reflexivity after having compared it with that of their informants, than before the fieldwork (Guber, 2005: 50).

Ultimately, the gaze is a filter that permeates both the conception of a journalistic work and the interpretation that is made of the experience. Being aware of this allows us to verify that a literary journalist understands that the place from which they look in order to *empalabrar* is molded by a historical-cultural process (Haraway, 1998 and Harstock, 1983)¹³ that situates it. Reflexivity also helps us to be aware of the privileges and the different systems of domination in which the journalist participates.

For this reason, we must understand reflexivity as a second-order reflection process (Ibáñez, 1994). It occurs “when an observing system creates distance to observe itself and, at a different level of observation, observes the processes and relationships of the system” (Aguado, 2003: 279). As we have already pointed out, this process, on the one hand, implies rethinking social imaginaries, privileges and the axes of oppression from which the gaze is constructed. On the other hand, being aware of one's own situated knowledge allows the development of a look beyond experientiality. It permits the incorporation of intersectionality (Davis, 2008) necessary to *empalabrar* a relationship without preconceptions, prejudices or stereotypes.

The dialectical observation of otherness made from a reflective gaze also implies recognizing the notion of community. Malinowski defined this as understanding things from *the native's point of view* and Geertz described it as: from the native's point of view

13 It is not the objective of this article to develop the feminist thought of Haraway (1998) and Harstock (1983). Even so, we have made a footnote to show that both authors select race, gender and class in order to highlight the collectives that are invisibilised, from patriarchal, privileged and Eurocentric positions.

without becoming a native (Geertz, 1995). In this sense, from our point of view, the reflective gaze is a participatory exercise in which the subjects try to interpret, narrate and create a common world through an exercise of intersubjectivity¹⁴. The exercise is dialogical and is the result of active listening and the assumption that journalists are neither passive nor external to what they experience and narrate.

In this proposal, the principle of reflexivity emerges as a starting point. At the same time, it is an attitude that we must have in order to face the task of interpreting. That then allows us to *empalabrar*. The gaze as a reflective process can be theorized in three stages. It involves journalists' awareness process. They approach the field and relate to the people who inhabit a space at a given time. In addition, it involves the fieldwork methods of observation and participation, and the *inventio*. If we consider this last point, the reflective gaze is decisive in the approach or *inventio* and, therefore, in the preparation prior to writing. Authors must be constantly aware that this look represents a filter that will determine their interpretation and understanding of the facts from zero hour. This includes the interpretation that they make of the narratives that they have collected, the selection of the elements they consider most appropriate for visibilising, and even the choice of research procedures.

Through a reflective gaze, the experiential practice that fieldwork entails becomes a dense description (Geertz, 1973). The reflective gaze makes it possible to recognize the distinctive marks which people, who belong to a community (in a space in a given time), use to classify their environment. To interpret these marks they understand, and attribute, a sense of the world. At the same time, they generate a discourse about what is happening, about human action, and about themselves. In other words, the reflective gaze, through a dense description, grants the ability to understand how the subjects have apprehended the *doxa*¹⁵. This is precisely in order to generate doubts, suspicions, and leakages around it, via the journalistic narrative. Rather than reproducing a hegemonic cultural narrative, this narration itself becomes a cultural narration that counteracts the *doxa* of the said hegemonic narrative.

With reference to the reflective gaze, the proposal reveals an urgency for authors to regard themselves as intellectuals. Casamajó views an author of literary journalism as a 'ventriloquist' who can mimic several voices at the same time: "*The one of the empirical author (the individual who writes) which is a real moment but linguistically virtual; that of the implicit author (the version of the empirical author that the reader infers from the story) which is effectively and linguistically a virtual instance; and that of the narrator (the voice that drives the story) which is a fictitious but linguistically real instance*" (2002: 143).

14 In the ethnographic field, the debate arose following the publication of Malinowski's personal diaries, at the end of the 1960s.

15 To approach the concept of *doxa*, we return to the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu. The author defines the field as a relatively autonomous space, with its own objectives, and with players who compete against each other (sometimes fiercely). They follow different strategies depending on their position and their ability to bet (capital) and who, at the same time, are interested in playing and recognize that it is worth playing. "A field is not simply a dead structure or a system of 'empty places' [...], but a playing space that only exists to the extent that there are also players who enter it, who believe in the rewards it offers and that they actively seek" (Bourdieu and Wacquant (2008) [1992]: 26). The *habitus* is "that system of durable, transferable structured dispositions, predisposed to functioning as structuring structures; i.e., as principles of generation and practice structuring, as well as representations that can be objectively regulated and regular, without at all being the product of obedience to the rules; and that objectively adapt to their goal without presupposing the conscious vision of the ends and the explicit skill of the operations necessary to achieve them; all being collectively orchestrated, without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor" (Bourdieu, 1991 [1980]: 92). The contribution that González makes to the concept of *doxa* is enlightening. He assures that it alludes "to first-order interpretation schemes, generally unreflexive, learned and experienced as natural, obvious and evident. They operate based on all practice and are learned or assumed by simple familiarization" (1998: 161).

Understanding this exercise in ventriloquism implies recognizing oneself as an intellectual subject whose subjectivity “should no longer be hidden.” “One must emerge as part of the methodology and seek the borders of journalistic *praxis* in professional ethics” (Gayà Morlà, 2015: 154). As a result, these journalistic ethics allow us to understand journalism as “*a link to human flourishing, commitment to the common good, reporting as the defining activity of journalism, a desire to make a difference, and a way to make a living*” (Borden, 2007: 49-50).

3. By way of conclusion: challenges and debates

Journalism, based on the reflective look, can argue a methodology and a method. Therefore, it constructs an alternative to the meta-narrative of accelerated capitalism in the digital age. What is revealed returns us to a temporality that we can inhabit in a coherent human way, i.e., understanding that the context and intersubjective interaction are a community's coherence lines. We understand that the proposal presented radically changes the logic of hyper-simulation. It allows the community to appropriate the here and now and to abandon the unchallenging *present continuous*. What is more, it gives credibility to journalism. It is the function of literary journalism to highlight the mirage constructed on platforms by capitalism. The reflective gaze gives us the epistemological framework to do it.

Despite this, we understand that some of the previously described contributions regarding the reflective gaze are an affront to the positivist canonical definition of journalism. They may also pose ethical dilemmas for literary journalists who assume the reflective gaze as a principle of action and interpretation, rather than just ontological subjectivism.

Assuming that journalism is a symbolic activity that conveys stories through interpretations, it questions conventions and ideals on which journalistic theory has been based. We refer to demonstrable truth as the justification of practice and discourse, the supposed objectivity or neutrality of journalists, and the search for *real* events in a present continuous which turn out to be fictitious. Undoubtedly, assuming the reflective gaze is moving away from the fetishism of the present and deconstructs derived practices such as immediacy (Deuze, 2005), speed, urgency, and the search for empirical facts.

The proposal implies an understanding that: a) the journalist is an intellectual undertaking an interpretive task; b) journalism deals with finding commonalities and giving meaning to a shared world as well as, once again, being a presence in social subjects; and c) the creative and cultural dimension of the story is recovered as a subjective and possible interpretation.

Journalism is a process in which it becomes clear that the author's gaze is reflective. It is built from a second-order reflection process and in relation to the *informants* who are now people with whom there is an intersubjective relationship. This is not a trivial issue, particularly if we consider the positivist roots exuded in university journalism departments. Our proposal highlights the fact that journalism is a creative discipline involving interpretation and the configuration of meaning.

Therefore, one of the challenges is to redefine the role of journalists with regards to the distance between them and the people they write about. Our understanding of authorship also needs to be addressed. We propose that authors should not just be defined as such because of the discourse being proposed, but also due to the responsibility they have as journalists to provide meaning and to construct a common world. Further work is needed to discuss and to reflect upon what the art world refers to as collective authorship. With regards to those people who are written about in the published article, in what way can they participate?

In field work, and in the exercise to *empalabrar*, a source ceases to be a source. As has already been pointed out, sources become people who can be themselves and who can speak from their individual and group intersubjectivity. Journalists stop justifying their work as that of external observers. They now assume that their activity is subjective and that their presence (and interaction with the community) affects the people about which they are writing. Information is no longer extracted from people. Instead (though an attitude of learning), the aim is to seek what sense they give to their world (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004). As a result, through an intentionally public discourse, the diversity of meanings and possible meanings is addressed. It goes beyond the meta-story that spreads hegemonic discourse in a community.

The separation between journalists and their sources becomes a sham, a pointless artifice. The reflective gaze implies a close, even empathic relationship with the people about whom a public discourse will be constructed. Once again, this reflection is a challenge, as this type of relationship between journalists and people contradicts one of the principles of journalism. This states that journalists have a responsibility to their readers and to the public interest, rather than to the subjects that are written about. The journalist has no alternative other than to be honest with the communities approached. Honesty is a key issue in journalism studies. Without an honest attitude, those people with whom you have interacted can feel betrayed (Malcolm, 2012).

The proposal also extends the notion of what is considered as newsworthy. Fieldwork goes beyond conflict. It converts daily life into a narrative. We understand that rather than just creating an event based on conflict, the reflective gaze allows the journalist to identify structures of meaning. It permits culture, and the power mechanisms that shape it, to be explained and questioned. It can also propose possible forms of emancipation.

Fieldwork in literary journalism also requires an extended presence. We should recall Leila Guerriero's point 5: "Only by staying do you get to know someone, and only by knowing someone do you understand them, and only by understanding them do you begin to see. And it is only when you start to see, that you can tell the story."

Such journalistic discourse is not configured based on a dramatic and spectacular narration of *empirical events* structured with the dual intention of entertaining and informing. It emerges as a way of understanding and is configured by an accumulation of details (not anecdotes) interpreted according to the point of view constructed by the author.

As John Berger (2013 [1972]) would say, looking presupposes a way of seeing. This way of seeing is equivalent to the complex process of interpreting the experience (rather than reality itself) *in and of* a space and a time that a journalist has shared with people. This interpretation will then be converted into a public narrative. This narrative implies to *empalabrar* what has been learnt in space and time with the aim of creating (as Gabriel García Márquez would say) "a critical portrait of our time" to build a community.

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