Factual Fictions

Factual Fictions:
Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel

By

Leonora Flis

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FOREWORD

ROBERT ALEXANDER, PH.D.,
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A Lee Lorenz cartoon in *The New Yorker* several years ago depicted two aging gentlemen sitting in disconsolate repose, presumably reflecting on their lives. One, looking glumly into the carpet, confesses to his scowling companion, "I aspired to authenticity, but I never got beyond verisimilitude."[1] There is something all–too familiar in this cartoon character's lament, a sense that, in our intensely mediated world, everything—even one's sense of self—has been reduced to an inferior copy of some original we can imagine but cannot attain. We live today, it would seem, on a crazy border between the authentic and the verisimilar, between fact and fiction, as it were: an ambiguous limit which, as the Slovene literary critic Janko Kos has observed, we, nonetheless, strive to surpass, or, in the words of our cartoon character, to "get beyond." This is the space of the postmodern.

And it is this complex space which Leonora Flis intrepidly explores in *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel*. One of the main contributions of this book lies in its recognition that the sorts of problems, paradoxes, and tensions commonly associated with the postmodern are exemplified, and frequently thematized, in works of the genre she calls the "documentary novel." Like its counterpart, fabulist fiction, the documentary novel, Flis argues, was a response to a postmodern ethos which emerged amidst the political ferment of the U.S. in the 1960s. Taking in a wide swath of the literary spectrum, running roughly from historical fiction and metafiction through literary journalism to the contemporary true crime novel, the documentary novel merges the authenticity of fact with the artfulness of verisimilitude. In her analysis of a range of works of this genre, she shrewdly demonstrates, moreover, how fact and fiction, combined in different ratios, produce an array of illuminating perspectives on the epistemological, ontological,

[1] Lee Lorenz, *The New Yorker*. June 25, 2007. ID: 124060.

aesthetic, and ethical problems shadowed forth by postmodernism.

What ultimately becomes evident in this anatomy of variations on a genre is that, while all of the works she discusses here take place between the poles of fact and fiction, the actual polarity of these terms is far less immanent than either commonsense or traditional taxonomies of genre might suggest. This book examines a border between nonfiction and fiction; in so doing, however, it reminds us that borders don't just separate—they also join, and, as such, they mark a space *common* to otherwise apparently distinct phenomena. Such reciprocal dependence opens, in turn, the possibility that whatever truths such texts represent, may, in fact, be the result of what Nancy Pedri has described as a "collaboration" of the factual and fictional.[2] That recognition alone makes this genre an invaluable site for the sort of analysis in which Flis here so astutely engages.

Her book also suggests, however, that the truths and actions of our lives themselves may be negotiated in this space between the authentic and the verisimilar, between the real and the textual. As she notes, "Fiction and facts are inextricably mixed in daily experience, and the documentary novel excogitates and reflects this condition well."[3] This stunning possibility is no where more provocatively dramatized than in the striking moment from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* when the killer, Perry Smith, confessing his crime to detective Alvin Dewey, resorts to a textual simile to account for his actions the night of the Clutter murders. "'How can I explain this?'" he says to Dewey. "'It was like I wasn't part of it. More as though I was reading a story. And I had to know what was going to happen. The end."[4] Here, a nonfiction character finds himself absent at the most decisive moment in his life; in the space where his most authentic self should be, there is instead "a story"—a fiction—which he follows, like the reader of any mystery, wondering what is going to happen next.

As the example of Perry Smith shows, much is at stake for the postmodern reader—be they inside or outside of the text. What Capote's "nonfiction novel" expresses in concrete terms, Leonora Flis argues here with systematic critical rigor. Along with adding a significant historical dimension to the developing field of literary journalism studies and contributing something new to the well–established area of 20th Century American literature, this book brings the documentary novel into clear

[2] Nancy Pedri, "Factual Matters: Visual Evidence in Documentary Fiction" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, Toronto, 2001), 48–9.
[3] Leonora Flis, "Contemporary American Documentary Novel" (PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, 2009), 91.
[4] Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 240.

focus for readers, suggesting that, in its hybridity, this genre may, in fact, offer a unique means of getting, if not "beyond" the quagmire of verisimilitude, at the very least, beyond the simplistic identification of such verisimilitude with inauthenticity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It took me a few years to complete this book. Thought after thought, word after word, page after page. The manuscript stared out as a dissertation, and later on, through additional research and analysis, acquired its present form. Moments of clarity and creative enthusiasm were occasionally clouded by moments of doubt and lack of vision. However, days of lucidity were frequent enough to disperse the clouds of insecurity and the spells of less effective writing. The end result is not a definite statement; it would be presumptuous to make such a claim, but, hopefully, the book will give ideas for further research and point to less researched areas in the scholarship of the documentary novel, both in the United States as well as in Slovenia.

I would not have been able to fully immerse myself in the chosen topic, had it not been for my one–year study at Fordham University in New York. I felt privileged to receive an international scholarship for doctoral candidates from The Rotary Foundation. It enabled me to become a part of Fordham's English Department graduate program. I was fortunate enough to meet many professors who were willing to give me wonderful suggestions on how I should tackle my area of research. The resources available at Fordham's library, as well as at The New York Public Library and other research institutions proved invaluable for my work. It is safe to say that this book would have sorely lacked precision and depth, if it had not been for my year in New York City. Moreover, the city itself was and continues to be my inspiration, on a professional, as well as on a more personal level.

I would first like to thank my dissertation advisor Dr. Jerneja Petrič from the University of Ljubljana, who directed and encouraged my work during my graduate studies at the Faculty of Arts. I want to extend this appreciation to Dr. Mark J. Madigan from Nazareth College in Rochester and Dr. Elizabeth Stone from Fordham University. Their comments and guidance helped me think more critically and efficiently separate the useful from the useless. Moreover, I am grateful to Dr. Robert Alexander from Brock University in Ontario for showing continuous interest in my work and for his lucid comments on my manuscript. I would also like to mention Dr. Sonja Merljak Zdovc, who has done valuable research on literary journalism in Slovenia and in the United States, as well as Dr.

Alenka Koron, who has been the voice of reason and has shrewdly advised me on my academic work and career for the past couple of years. Naturally, I am indebted to several scholars who have previously delved in the issues concerning the precarious divide between facts and fiction and examined the phenomena of documentary novel and literary journalism, as well as the complex notion of postmodernity.

Above all, my gratitude goes to my mother and my friends who believed in me. Additionally, Peter Sovinc, who created the cover, deserves special credit. Lastly, I wish to thank the Cambridge Scholars Publishing staff, specifically Carol Koulikourdi, Amanda Millar, and Soucin Yip-Sou, who were supportive and patient.

INTRODUCTION

"There are no facts only interpretations
and this too is an interpretation."
~ Gianni Vattimo*

"Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterwards you ask, 'is it
true?' and if the answer matters, you've got your answer."
~ Tim O'Brien

The main objective of my book is to explain as clearly and as elaborately as possible the narrative phenomenon called the documentary or the nonfiction novel. I believe the terms "nonfiction" and "documentary" can be used interchangeably, however, I primarily use the term documentary novel.[1] My analysis focuses predominantly on the writings by American

* Vattimo complements Friedrich Nietzsche's famous statement: "There are no facts only interpretations."

[1] I see both terms as equally valid and appropriate to describe works that read like novels, but are based on facts documented by the author. Both terms denote a novel version of nonfictional events. In order to maintain terminological consistency, I mainly use the term "documentary," but I find it inappropriate to change the terminology of the main theoreticians I quote in my thesis. Namely, frequently the term "nonfiction novel" is used to refer to the literary phenomenon in question. If, however, they use it in any other context, or with other shades of meaning, that is clearly indicated. Broadly speaking, *documentary* approach in art denotes presenting facts objectively, without editorializing or inserting fictional matter, and that, in short, means presenting reality as *nonfiction* does. It ought to be noted, however, that there are a lot of terminological inconsistencies when it comes to the phenomenon of the documentary novel. Some scholars prefer the term faction, denoting a fusion of facts and fiction. (Alex Haley used this term to describe his work *Roots*, 1976.) Some point to close resemblance between the nonfiction novel and historiographic metafiction (e.g., Linda Hutcheon, who sees as the main point of congruence between the two narratives their inclination towards metafictionality and provisionality), and in Latin America, the term testimonio novel appeared. Finally, there are studies which simply see the documentary novel as an example of a historical narrative. Nancy Pedri in her dissertation *Factual Matters: Visual Evidence in Documentary Fiction* (2001) puts an equation between New Journalism, literary journalism, and the documentary novel (57). Moreover, John Hellmann (*Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as*

authors, for it is in the United States that this particular literary genre or style of writing has developed in a truly versatile and abundant way. Chris Anderson in *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction* (1987) argues that this particular genre is "inextricably connected with the effort to express the force and magnitude and sheer overpowering energy of the American experience" (2).

The stories that combine facts and imagination are hardly a new phenomenon, and have a considerable past in the history of Anglo-American literature—Defoe, Dickens, Twain, and later, Dreiser, Dos Passos, Doctorow, and Styron could well fit this profile. Moreover, features such as pluralism of truths, blurring of borders between facts and fiction, and the relativization of truth and reality do not represent a real novelty. Can these traits not be found already in such works as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*? However, the new version of the documentary novel has specifics of its own, applying mostly to its (new) epistemological and ontological bases which reflect specific cultural, socio-political, and philosophical conditions that engender them.

Ever since the documentary novel re–entered the American literary scene—in an updated variant—during the tempestuous 1960s, it has not lost its appeal to this day. It also appears that at the time of its re–emergence, it was closely linked with the journalistic–literary phenomenon of New Journalism, which also sprang to life in the 1960s.[2] These two narrative types have, to a degree, reciprocally impregnated one another; just as they were equally affected by the prevailing socio–political and cultural atmosphere of that time.

New Fiction, 1981), sees the new type of journalistic writing as "an important response to the dislocations of the contemporary American experience" (ix), and believes that the terms nonfiction novel and New Journalism can be used synonymously, for they denote one and the same phenomenon. Slovenian scholar and journalist Sonja Merljak Zdovc in her dissertation on Tom Wolfe and New Journalism ("Novi žurnalizem Toma Wolfa v ZDA in Sloveniji"; in translation, "Tom Wolfe's New Journalism in the U.S. and in Slovenia") views the nonfiction novel as a subcategory of literary journalism. She divides the latter into narrative journalism and nonfiction novels. Merljak points out the difference between texts that are published like journalism articles in magazines and newspapers, and texts published in book form. In her view, both is literary journalism. However, these texts differ in terms of length and the writers' research methodology (see Merljak Zdovc 2004, 9).

[2] Today, the term literary journalism is mostly used for this type of writing. Other terms exist as well, but are less frequent: narrative journalism, creative nonfiction, and discursive journalism.

During the 1960s, the cultural, political, and social aspects of the American reality were indeed undergoing a profound transformation. In his work *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (1981), John Hellmann discusses the resurfacing of the long-buried forces of the American psyche in the areas of politics, technology, in subcultures, and in social climate as such. The Americans found themselves confronted daily by realities that were as actual as they seemed fictional; television undoubtedly played a significant role in creating this fiction–like reality. The images of the mass media became a surrogate experience of reality. Those conditions were unique and revolutionary enough to bring into question also some of the fundamental concerns of the ontological status of reality, namely, those of truth and facts. Such philosophical concerns, as I argue later on, tie in well with (or rather, embody) the simultaneous birth of the postmodern thought.

My study shows how the traditional viewing of the fictional and the factual as two antithetical narrative poles must be reconsidered and reevaluated in order to properly elucidate the documentary novel, a genre which indeed denotes an innovative break with the conventional boundaries of the established literary genres. The documentary novel reflects one of the seminal tendencies of the times of its re–birth, namely, that of opposition to establishment, tradition, and convention of any kind. I am referring to postmodern times of metaphysical void and epistemological crisis, caused undoubtedly also by certain groundbreaking technological and scientific innovations, as well as sweeping social and political uproars. The concepts of fragmentation and decentering, criticism of the idea of logocentrism as well as of any other notion that implies a stable, anchored meaning (essence, consciousness, conscience) necessitate the creation of hybrid genres which, is precisely what the documentary novel is at its core, in my opinion.

Moreover, it is essential to view and interpret the re–emergence of the documentary novel in light of the birth of another 1960s novelty, New Journalism, as previously noted. In addition to the temporal synchronicity that connects the two phenomena in question, the most obvious correlation between the two is their use of documentation, i.e., verifiable links to the empirical world, as well as the ways in which they resort to the fictitious—the author's imagination, his subjective interpretative powers, and moreover, the techniques of fiction–writing, such as development of character, the points of view of a participant/character in the action, and verbatim dialogue.

The term "nonfiction novel"[3] as such was not given wide recognizability (in fact, it hardly existed within the canon of literary terms), until Truman Capote confidently bestowed this classification on his work *In Cold Blood* when it was published in the book form in 1965 (it first ran as a serial in *The New Yorker* in the fall 1965; it was titled *Annals of Crime: In Cold Blood*). At the same time, Tom Wolfe, the key figure behind the journalistic–literary stream of New Journalism, proclaimed himself as the father of the nonfiction novel genre. There was definitely some controversy present as far as the claiming the "artistic fatherhood" of the nonfiction novel was concerned.[4] In truth, neither of the two men invented the nonfiction novel, as this type of hybrid narrative had been around long before Capote's or Wolfe's work. However, as John Hartsock observes (in *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 2000), it was Capote who "achieved a literary and even philosophical depth in *In Cold Blood* that could rival canonical writers" (196).[5]

My book largely focuses on contemporary authors: Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, John Berendt, and Don DeLillo. These writers are all unique in their poetics and aesthetic approaches to writing, and each of them assumes a specific artistic position towards the phenomenon of the documentary novel. The study investigates, and consequently confirms or discards, certain claims that have been made about their writing, and thus

[3] The term "nonfiction," when it stands on its own, can include various types of writing: historiography, essay–writing, biography, memoir, narrative/literary journalism, as well as scholarly articles.

[4] When Capote was asked what he thought of New Journalists he said that "James Breslin and Tom Wolfe, and that crowd, they have nothing to do with creative journalism … because neither of them have the proper fictional technical equipment". … "[T]o be a good creative reporter, you have to be a very good fiction writer," he concluded. See Capote's 1966 interview in *The New York Times*: George Plimpton, "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel," *The New York Times on the Web* (January 16, 1966), http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-interview.html (accessed May 20, 2006).
Robert Boynton, the author of *The New New Journalism* (2005) expresses his surprise that Wolfe is usually considered the "patron saint" of New Journalism. "His work bears little resemblance to that of other New Journalists (Michael Herr, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, John Sack, Gay Talese—all included in Wolfe's anthology), his subject matter (manners and morals, cultural trends) is distinct from those of his colleagues: politics (Mailer, Didion), war (Herr, Sack), and crime (Capote, Talese). His writing style—hyperbolic, frenzied, hectoring—is inimitable" (Boynton xx).

[5] For the impact *In Cold Blood* had on the literary scene at the time, see Nicolaus Mills's work *The New Journalism: A Historical Anthology* (1974), as well as Gerald Clarke's biography *Capote* (2005).

simultaneously highlights the features that connect their works, as well as identifies those specifics that make them diverge from one another. There are some mentions of the authors who, prior to the 1960s, created narratives which could (loosely) be termed documentary or nonfiction novels (Defoe, Dickens, possibly Doctorow). I briefly gloss over their texts in order to emphasize my point how subjective journalism often spills into longer narratives, specifically into documentary novels that can oscillate between historical novels, crime narratives, travelogues, or political commentaries, on the one hand, and journalism on the other.

In my view, Capote's book *In Cold Blood*,[6] which is supposed to be a seminal example of the documentary novel, represents a unique paradox. We have the author's claim of the book's absolute factuality, however, the self-proclaimed innovator of the nonfiction novel made numerous errors of fact in his writing.[7] Norman Mailer, with *The Executioner's Song* (1979)[8] as well as his earlier narrative *The Armies of the Night* (1968)[9], is much more in line with the definition of the documentary novel that my study proposes (both in his writing and in his public stance). The most recent

[6] All the page numbers of excerpts from *In Cold Blood* refer to the following edition: *In Cold Blood*, New York: The Modern Library, 1992.

[7] As far as the terminology goes, Capote himself, judging from the answer he gave to George Plimpton in the 1966 interview for *The New York Times*, distinguished between the "documentary novel" and the "nonfiction novel." The following is his reply to Plimpton's query whether the nonfiction novel can be defined by the degree of the fiction skills involved and the extent of the author's absorption with his subject: "The nonfiction novel should not be confused with the documentary novel—a popular and interesting but impure genre, which allows all the latitude of the fiction writer, but usually contains neither the persuasiveness of fact nor the poetic altitude fiction is capable of reaching. The author lets his imagination run riots over the facts!" Capote did not, however, state any specific examples of "documentary novels." He further explained that when he first created his theories of the nonfiction novel, many people were not very sympathetic of his views. "They felt that what I proposed, a narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual, was little more than a literary solution for fatigued novelists suffering from 'failure of imagination'." Naturally, Capote was offended by such claims. He wanted to prove that reporting can be made as interesting as fiction, and also done as artistically.

[8] The subsequent page references in the text refer to the following edition: *The Executioner's Song*, New York: Vintage International, 1998.

[9] The book is certainly glossed, for it is a unique example of a documentary narrative. Mailer essentially created his own genre for this narrative, split into historicized and novelized accounts of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon. The subsequent page references in the text refer to the following edition: *The Armies of the Night*, New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

work of nonfiction discussed is John Berendt's book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994)[10].

Furthermore, I gloss Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988),[11] a masterful, sometimes fictional, sometimes factual biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, as I believe the book could indeed be placed within the domain of the concept of postmodern documentary narratives. The choice of narratives in my book is not entirely random—a noteworthy contour runs through all of them, i.e., the theme of a deviant crime (with the exception of *The Armies of the Night*), whether it be in a form of a brutal manslaughter or an equally atrocious assassination.

Mailer, DeLillo and Berendt, as opposed to Capote, did not attempt to make their narratives a closed system, a system of one irrefutable meaning, or, from a Derridean perspective, a totalitarian text. They are aware of the fact, explained in great detail in Paul Ricœur's *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985), that the activity of producing a verbal representation of some part of the past in a text is always rhetorical, and therefore interpretative. They are conscious of the "pastness of the past," as Ricœur has it.

Additionally, I am in search of a possible exegesis of the ontological and epistemological base of the documentary novel. Simultaneously, the book illuminates the historical, social, and cultural contexts proper that outline the background of the phenomenon in focus. It would be somewhat illusionary and presumptuous to state that my study yields the ultimate and hence closed definition of the documentary novel. Not only do the levels of fictionality and factuality oscillate in the works that are scrutinized but there is also a significant structural and, obviously, thematic disparity that exists among the selected documentary narratives. These dissimilarities range from metafictional imparities to the differing variations of more traditional realistic novels. Therefore, finding a uniform and fixed definition seems to be a virtually impossible task. Yet, fluidity is precisely what, in my view, lies at the core of documentary narratives. This is my definitive claim in the following chapters.

To term a narrative product "nonfiction" is a decision that often appears to be more socially manufactured and negotiated by the author, the reader, and finally, by the publisher than obtained by some empirical standard of truth. James Frey, the author of *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), was a subject of a lot of controversial debates, triggered precisely by him

[10] The subsequent page references in the text refer to the following edition: *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, London: Vintage, 1997.

[11] The subsequent page references in the text refer to the following edition: *Libra*, London: Penguin Books, 1988.

embellishing parts of what he called his memoir on his drug addiction and alcoholism phase.[12] Both Capote's and Frey's examples, each in its own way, clearly show the extreme importance of how a piece of writing is marketed, and, consequently, read. Frequently subtitles have a catchy, attention–grabbing commercial purpose, and somewhat false marketing can quickly arouse ethical concerns. This is an area that is, in part, discussed in this study as well, for it seems to be inevitably linked with the problem of the classification of narratives that combine facts with imagination.

In the reality that embraces us, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish facts from fiction. What is more, "a disastrously large number of media consumers are not interested in the distinction," as Peter Allen Lefevre points out (5).[13] Expanding the consequences of such thinking beyond the borders of the United States seems only appropriate, if not necessary. Given the fact that, viewed globally, the contemporary literary studies have been interested mostly in fictional discourse, popular culture, social history and practice, an investigation of the texts that reach "over the edge" of either canonical fiction or nonfiction seems long overdue.

My analysis also incorporates selected works by a few Slovene authors. American and European literary trends normally do not follow each other in direct succession. When we attempt to create a timeline or a taxonomy of specific literary phenomena, there is often a distinct temporal gap between the American and European occurrences. Moreover, there are apparent thematic and ideological differences as well. As I show, there have been cases of (semi)literary journalism[14] on the Slovene ground (mostly in the form of feature stories in the late 1960s and the early 1970s), but there is no proof of there being any tangible link between American New Journalism and Slovene feature stories of that time.

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[12] Frey has his own view on the nature and status of fictional and factual narratives (he is referring to memoirs in particular): "I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection." He calls his book an instance of "a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic." See Frey, "A Note to the Reader," (January, 2006), http://www.randomhouse.com/trade/publicity/pdfs/AMLP020106.pdf (accessed February 20, 2006).

[13] Peter Alan Lefevre, *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood as Nonfiction Novel: A Reevaluation* (MA Thesis, California State University, 1999).

[14] Literary journalism is a term that is broader in regard to its temporal aspect, if compared to the term New Journalism. It denotes the same journalistic–literary phenomenon, but it is not limited solely to the texts created in the 1960s and the early 1970s in the United States.

According to Sonja Merljak Zdovc, the first systematic and deliberate use of novelistic techniques in Slovene journalism could be found already in the 1920s and the 1930s.[15] Moreover, between 1958 and 1964, the first important circle of journalists who wrote feature stories and aspired to use novelistic techniques in their writing gathered at the magazine *Mladina*. *Mladina* was, in a way, a classroom for those who wanted to move on to more prestigious weekly publications published by Časopisno podjetje Delo[16], such as *Tovariš* and *Tedenska tribuna*. However, as Merljak Zdovc observes, those texts were not written so much as an objection to factographic writing, but mainly for political reasons, to oppose the state administration and its principles of governing or rather controlling the country (especially the press).

In Slovenia, the 1980s and the 1990s brought significant socio-political and cultural changes and with them narratives such as Miloš Mikeln's *Veliki voz* (*The Big Dipper*) (1992), and Tone Perčič's *Izganjalec hudiča* (*The Exorcist*) (1994), which foreground the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge. Broadly speaking, contemporary Slovene documentary narratives fall in two categories. They can either be interpreted as examples of historiographic metafiction, with modernistic and postmodernistic bases, or as documentary novels with an accentuated traditional, realistic base. The latter type seems to prevail.

In essence, the book strives to provide new organizing, structural principles, ontological, epistemological, and cultural matrices, critical approaches, and, finally, terminology that could be applied to concrete examples of documentary narratives. In my view, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's work titled *The Mythopoeic Reality: Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (1976) represents one of the first notable examples of a book–length study of the nonfiction novel. His work is used as the base for our analysis. Other scholars followed—John Hollowell, John Hellmann, Barbara Foley, as well as more recent ones like Daniel W. Lehman, Robert S. Boynton, and Ruth Ronen, to name a few. Naturally, there is a number of literary theoreticians, belonging to different theoretical schools of thought who have, in their investigations, directly or indirectly addressed the questions of genres, fictionality, narrativity, referentiality in narratives, the categories

[15] Sonja Merljak Zdovc, "The Use of Novelistic Techniques in Slovene Journalism: the Case of Magazine Tovariš," *Journalism Studies,* 8. 2 (2007): 248–263. See also Merljak Zdovc's dissertation "Novi žurnalizem Toma Wolfa v ZDA in Sloveniji" (PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, 2004).

[16] The publisher Delo is one of the largest and most important media companies in Slovenia.

of time, the narrator, the reader and so on (e.g., Derrida, Barthes, Barth, Ricœur, Searle, Genette, Wittgenstein).[17]

Trying to properly accommodate theoretical observations on the documentary novel, I found myself grappling with a rather disparate array of disciplines and theoretical approaches. My study combines analytical, synthetic, historical, comparative, and philosophical methods. What is typical of this methodological approach is the creating of interdisciplinary links between literary studies and other disciplines. Literature is viewed within a larger context, whether it be a literary, a (broader) artistic, a cultural, or a social. Thus, literature becomes a system—a complex set of features that relate to extratextual models. I believe it is only by seeing fictional and nonfictional propositions in literature as a property that is attached to texts on the basis of a variety of cultural and social criteria that can we identify and explain the nature and structure of narratives which combine factual and fictional features.

Methodological pluralism is present throughout this study or, if we use Tomo Virk's terminology from *Moderne metode literarne vede* (1999) (*Modern Methods of Literature Studies*), the analysis mostly inhabits the sphere of the "third methodological paradigm." This also denotes that we utilize principles of empirical literary studies which presuppose that there are no fixed interpretations of reality and its phenomena but rather individual perspectives and reconstructions.[18] Within such "empirical" paradigm, literature (as a semiotic system) is seen as a special social subsystem. Such methodological approach allows or rather demands a scrutiny that incorporates a wide and versatile range of factors, from

[17] As far as Slovene literary scholarship is concerned, mostly Janko Kos's and Tomo Virk's perspectives are at the forefront.

[18] This is in fact in line with the postmodern literary theory and aesthetics, incorporating theoretical foundations which reject the uncoded experience of reality, and foreground the superimposition of the human mind on the given data. This theory is frequently termed "relational" theory (as opposed to "absolutist" or "totalizing"), for it states that there is no ultimate reality or truth, and that (literary) texts are merely versions of constructed and (con)textualized reality. Mario J. Valdés in *Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature* (1987) advocates what he terms "relational theory" of literature (as opposed to "absolutist"), the beginnings of which in fact go far back in history, to the eighteenth century and the philosophy of Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher who claimed that when man perceives the world, without being fully aware of it, he perceives the shape of his own mind superimposed on the given data.

socio-political, socio-cultural to strictly literary, or more specifically, textual.[19]

[19] For a concise and detailed overview of methods in literary studies, see the Introduction chapter in Virk's study (7–12). Slovene literary scholar Marijan Dović wrote his MA thesis on the systems and empirical theories of literature (under the supervision of literary scholars Marko Juvan and Tomo Virk) and published it in 2004 (*Sistemske in empirične obravnave literature*; in translation, *System and Empirical Analyses of Literature*). Dović devotes a large section of his writing to the development and workings of the "empirical science of literature," as he calls is, clearly drawing on the German original. I believe empirical literary studies is a more appropriate term in English. Dović bases his work on the theory of a German scholar Siegfried J. Schmidt and his book *Grundriss der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* (1980), in which Schmidt formed the concept of the "empirical science of literature" (*Literaturwissenschaft*). An important correlation can be identified also between Schmidt's model and Pierre Bordieu's "theory of the literary field," explicated in his book *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996) (originally published in French in 1992), as well as the "polysystem theory" of Itmar Even–Zohar (*Polysystem Studies*, 1990).

CHAPTER ONE

THE (RE)EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVES

"There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction;
there's only narrative."
~ E. L. Doctorow

"Each day a few more lies eat into the seed with which we are born,
little institutional lies from the print of newspapers, the shock waves of
television, and the sentimental cheats of the movie screen."
~ Norman Mailer

"Narrative" is a term that, according to all the major dictionaries of literary terms, denotes the act of telling a sequence of events, often in chronological order. Additionally, the term can refer to any story, whether in prose or verse, told, written or filmed, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do. The breadth of the term generously embraces the oral, written, and visual (e.g., films as narratives) narration. Some narratives are reportorial, documentary and clearly refer to facts—news articles, biographies, autobiographies, and types of historical accounts. Furthermore, narratives can also be highly imaginative, as evidenced in fairy tales, legends, novels, novelettes, short stories, and the like.

I have chosen the more general term documentary *narrative* (and not the documentary novel) in the title of this chapter, so as to refer to a wide range of accounts with extratextual epistemological implications. In other words, I discuss various types of fact–involving stories, ranging from the highly factual or objective accounts to the considerably more fictional and subjective pieces. Out of this spectrum of narratives, the phenomenon of the documentary novel is gradually extracted.

I argue that documentary novels, as they re-appeared in the 1960s, are evidently linked with a (simultaneous) journalistic–literary phenomenon known as New Journalism (and, by the same token, also with the broader concept of literary journalism). At the same time, they display equal

likeness to a fairly large array of texts that blur the fact/fiction boundary and can be traced in the Anglo-American literary history as early as in the eighteenth century (e.g., Defoe's tale *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722[1]).

The 1960s and How the (Narrative) World Quivered

The 1960s were undoubtedly a tumultuous time worldwide, not only in the United States. Let us, however, concentrate specifically on the American situation, for the decade's characteristics are of crucial importance for identifying the incentive for the burst of documentary narratives. One can surely talk about a unique shift, a profound transformation in American culture in general. As previously mentioned, in *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (1981), John Hellmann elaborately discussed the major changes in the U.S. in the areas of politics, technology, and subcultures; in short, in a general outlook on life in America. Similarly, John Hollowell (*Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, 1977) suggests that the apocalyptic mood of the sixties, with the political protests, televised assassinations, and hippie counterculture, resulted in a "blur of the comfortable distinctions between reality and unreality, fantasy and fact" (Foley 1986, 12).[2]

The blurring of these distinctions did not only produce subjectivized, interpretative journalistic stance within print and broadcast journalism but also allowed the capitalist and consumerism schema to impose its own limitations and constraints, conventions and expectations on writers and their readers. Edward Epstein (*News from Nowhere*, 1973) made an analysis of network television's claim to "mirror" reality. He showed how masterfully television delineates—in carefully illustrated and documented

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[1] The book starts with the following explanation: "Being observations or memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665. Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made public before." See, the Project Gutenberg EBooks page, http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=217305 (accessed June 2, 2008).
Defoe's book is a fictionalized account of the year 1665, in which the Great Plague struck the city of London. It is likely that it is based on the journals of Defoe's uncle, Henry Foe.

[2] See Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986).

detail—the political, economic, organizational, and technical forces that constitute a "web of expectations," and thus determines the shape of the "story," regardless of the event's true significance (Hellmann 1981, 5).

In the 1960s, biopics, film or television biographies with fictionalized episodes woven into their texture, became very popular.[3] Hellmann speaks of the power of the "mass–media journalism" (2), and thus anticipates the words of Frederick R. Karl (*American Fictions*, 1983), who explains how "with television and satellite communications, a global audience was being prepared for new messages. Television crept into every value system, since its demands for production and consumption were voracious: no less than the making of an insatiable consumer society" (561).[4]

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, America was undoubtedly poised for a social, cultural, and political revolution. Even politics became part of a consumer system, just like many other aspects of the society, including books, films, and personalities. The images of the mass media became a surrogate experience of reality. Or, in Gunter Gebauer's words (*Mimesis: Culture–Art–Society*, 1995): "The images of the mass media are related mimetically to presupposed realities . . . they become a surrogate experience of reality. [I]mages are becoming realities; . . . distinctions between images and fictions break down" (2). This was also a time when many subcultures developed. Karl believes that the emergence of the nonfiction novel, this specific literary "subgenre," as he calls it, is profoundly connected with the proliferation of subcultures and states how "in nonfiction novel history, sociology, criminology, even autobiography became matters indirectly related to the novel (283)."[5]

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[3] Composite characters were frequently found in popular television "docudramas," programs that blended fiction in varying proportions.

[4] Naturally, there is a difference between a verbal narrative (textual narrative) and a visual narrative (i.e., film), but both are constructed narratives that carry the power of actuality. "There is something to knowing that the victim is actual, not an actor or a fictional construct, in either film or written text," writes Daniel W. Lehman (*Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction Over the Edge*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997, 127). In 1967, a film version of Capote's *In Cold Blood* (dir. Richard Brooks) was released. Alvin Dewey, an agent from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, was among the guests at the premiere and prior to the screening he said: "I'm really anxious how the movie portrays my organization." See Deirdree Carmody's 1967 article in *The New York Times* article "Capote and Friends See 'In Cold Blood' at Quiet Screening," ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times (1851–2003)*, (December 13, 1967; accessed May 15, 2005).

[5] On the development of the American consumer society and the subcultures in the 1960s and 1970s, see Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1949–1980: a*

America saw a simultaneous rise of corporate hegemony and daring attempts of reportorial/writing circles to counter those tendencies. Investigative journalism appeared and offered individual (tentatively called unbiased) views on primarily political and business sector scandals. Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night* (1968) critically viewed the influential figures and institutions of his time that brainwashed the people:

> It was the authority who had covered the land with those suburbs where they stifled as children while watching the adventures of the West in the movies, while looking at the guardians of dull genial celebrity on television; they had had their minds jabbed and poked and twitched and probed and finally galvanized into surrealistic modes of response by commercials cutting into dramatic narratives, and parents flipping from network to network. . . . The authority had operated on their brain with commercials, and washed their brain with packaged politics. (86, 87)

Many major events marked American reality in the 1960s (and later, in the 1970s): the Vietnam war, the Black Power Movement, the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, of Malcom X in 1965, and of Martin Luther King in 1968, Woodstock, the Apollo 11 Moon landing, protests in Washington, and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement. These events were followed by Gary Gilmore's execution (he was the first man to be executed in the U.S. after the death penalty was reinstated in 1976), the Watergate affair and the subsequent resignation of President Nixon, the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, and so on.

This revolutionary period, which lasted into the mid–1970s, was not only characterized by idealism, but also by increased urban crime and a propensity for some groups to resort to violence in challenging the "establishment." President Kennedy's assassination in particular commenced an era of violence in the 1960s. The key bearers of these winds of change were primarily college students and their first attempt to test the validity of the change publicly and politically was the Free Speech Movement, which began at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1964. The movement was a challenge to the traditional sources of political and

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Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation (New York: Harper & Row, 1983, 282–286). See also Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (2003) and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1999). Maz'ud Zavarzadeh, for instance, describes the post–Second World War period as a shift from the "modernist preoccupation with values as the ground of experience to a postmodernist preoccupation with experience as the ground of values" (1976, 72).

academic authority. In fact, radical activism, the notorious Hell's Angels, and the hippie culture, originated in the San Francisco–Berkeley area.

Early antiwar protests were relatively harmless affairs and had few noteworthy consequences. However, when President Johnson increased the draft calls from 17,000 a months to 35,000 a month in July 1965, this action caused a wave of domestic protest of immense proportions. Various, disparate groups, from students and businessmen to housewives, formed a large pacifist coalition. Some of the most notorious and provocative demonstrations took place on the Berkeley campus in California. Marc Weingarten informs us in his book *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution* (2006) that Norman Mailer was deeply involved in the antiwar movement and "his involvement in the antiwar cause became a creative supercharger (181)." The Vietnam War provided the writer with a lot of useful source material.[6]

Naturally, all these milestone events and shifts in the general social and political climate were diligently observed by journalists, just as they were, simultaneously, reflected and noted also in the sphere of literature, mainly and most recognizably, in prose narratives (many of them started out as journalistic reports and grew into longer accounts). In order to properly elucidate the phenomenon of the documentary novel, we first need to focus on journalistic endeavors. In other words, the re–appearance of the documentary novel needs to be seen and analyzed in light of the birth of New Journalism.

The New Journalists–Novelists or "The Gang That Would Not Write Straight"[7]

We can trace the beginnings of New Journalism (and literary journalism as such) back in the late nineteenth century.[8] The techniques of literary (or

[6] Mailer described the notorious March on the Pentagon on October 21, 1967 in his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *The Armies of the Night* (New York: New American Library, 1968). See also Mailer's book *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York: Putnam, 1967).

[7] I borrowed the phrase from the title of Marc Weingarten's book *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006)

[8] Most of these nineteenth–century narratives evade a direct confrontation with the historical authenticity of the present or the recent past. Rather they depict "distant pasts"—e.g., Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1891). George Orwell wrote an extremely

subjective, as opposed to strictly factual) journalism have apparently been used for centuries and many writers whose works are now regarded as classics wrote nonfiction works with literary flair, namely Charles Dickens, Jack London, George Orwell, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, and John Hersey, to name a few.[9] Nevertheless, it was Tom Wolfe, the proverbial father of New Journalism and somewhat of a cultural icon in the 1960s and the 1970s, who anthologized a group of writers under the rubric "New Journalism" and identified them as "rivals to the best novelists of their time".[10]

Wolfe reports the following in the anthology titled *The New Journalism* (1973), which he co–edited with E.W. Johnson:

> In the early 1960s a curious notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere.[11] It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would . . . read like a novel. *Like* a novel, if you get the picture. This was the sincerest form of homage to the Novel and to those greats, the novelist, of course. (9)

Wolfe explained that he had no idea who had coined the term New Journalism or even when it was coined.

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witty, as well as acidic and straightforward account of his life among the poorest in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). The book is a vivid first–person account of Orwell's battle with poverty in the two capital cities. He deliberately chose this sort of life, after working as a policeman for the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for a few years left him feeling miserable and ashamed of the British colonialism.

[9] Phyllis Frus in her work *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), studies reportage by Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Janet Malcolm and favors the obliteration of what she thinks are artificial boundaries between literature and journalism, fiction and nonfiction, between canonical and noncanonical narratives. Stephen Crane, she reports, "cared so little about whether something he wrote was a sketch, a tale or a front–page reporting that his editors have had a hard time sorting it out" (xviii).

[10] For further insight into Wolfe's cultural/social positioning, see Jack Shafer's article "The New New Journalism: Gonzo's for the 21st Century", *The New York Times on the Web: Sunday Book Review*, (March 20, 2005) http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/20/books/review/020SHAFER.html (accessed May 25, 2007).

[11] Statusphere is supposedly Wolfe's term which he used to describe certain social status symbols as well as the conventions and rules created by specific subcultures. See also Merljak Zdovc 2004, 73.

> Seymour Krim tells me that he first heard it used in 1965 when he was editor of Nugget and Pete Hamill called him and said he wanted to write an article called 'the New Journalism' about people like Jimmy Breslin and Gay Talese. It was late in 1966 when you first started hearing people talk about 'the New Journalism' in conversation, as best as I can remember. I don't know for sure. . . . To tell the truth, I've never even liked the term. Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with 'New' in it is just beginning for trouble. . . . New journalism was no movement. There were no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a saloon where the faithful gathered. At the time, themed sixties, one was aware only that all of a sudden there was some sort of artistic excitement in journalism, and that was a new thing in itself. (1973, 23)

New Journalism embodied an undeniable burning need of a circle of writers to break free from the conventional ideas and forms: an aspiration to perhaps break through the media created corporate fiction. On the one hand, Wolfe described the goal of New Journalists in the 1960s as an attempt to do what novelists failed to achieve at the time—to capture the manners and morals of the decade properly. However, Wolfe's way of presenting New Journalism showed no apparent connection with the "base," traditional journalism. In fact, he consistently struggled with the conformist approaches and strategies, and indeed managed, together with his circle of writers, to break free from both the rigid journalistic forms, as well as from the outmoded academic preconceptions.

Wolfe identified the Novel itself as New Journalism's literary predecessor, supporting this conviction by claiming that the main practitioners of New Journalism were, in truth, reviving the European tradition of literary realism:

> If you follow the progress of New Journalism closely through the 1960s, you see an interesting thing happening. You see journalists learning the techniques of realism—particularly the sort found in Fielding, Smollett, Balzac, Dickens and Gogol—from scratch. . . . [J]ournalists began to discover the devices that gave the realistic novel its unique power, variously known as 'immediacy,' its 'concrete reality,' its 'emotional involvement,' its 'gripping' or 'absorbing' quality. (1973, 31)

As reports Weingarten, Charles Dickens, with his writing that existed in "a shadow region between speculative fiction and reportage and enabled him to speculate on the inner lives of his characters with great specificity," was greatly admired by Wolfe (2006, 11, 12). A possible connection between realism and (New) Journalism is not unfounded, but their

relationship is a complicated one, a process of complex borrowing and changing.

In the words of Robert S. Boynton (*The New New Journalism*, 2005): "Wolfe simultaneously 'dethroned' the novel, broke from American journalism, and claimed the mantle of the eighteenth– and nineteenth–century European novel. Literary realism—particularly the work of Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Dickens, Zola, and Balzac—became his *cri de guerre*" (xviii).

Wolfe made a provocative claim about the power of realism, or rather realistic technique of writing[12]:

> The genius of any writer—again in fiction or in nonfiction—will be severely handicapped if he cannot master, or if he abandons the techniques of realism. The psychological, moral, philosophical, emotional, poetic, visionary (one may supply the adjectives as needed) power of Dickens, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Mann, Faulkner is made possible only by the fact that they first wired their work into the main circuit, which is realism. (1973, 34)

Furthermore, Wolfe listed examples of works that could be treated as forerunners of the twentieth–century New Journalism—Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which was in fact presented by Defoe as the actual memoir of a shipwrecked sailor, Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836) (the descriptions of typical London figures, coachmen, originally written for the *Morning Chronicle*), and Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), to name a few.[13]

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[12] The term "realism" that I am using here does not refer to the literary movement in the nineteenth century (1830–1880). Realism in this context denotes an ahistorical, universal concept, a literary method that is based on detailed descriptions, probability principles, and denial of idealization and escapism. "Realism" can also be a typological notion—realistic style of writing, which can be seen as a universal, trans–historical concept as well. When viewed ahistorically, "realism" is a style, a method, or a technique of writing. The fact is, however, that at the time of the duration of the (historical) literary movement of realism, this technique was the prevailing one. See also Alojzija Zupan Sosič, *Robovi mreže, robovi jaza* (Maribor: Študentska založba Litera, 2006), 29–31.

[13] Ben Yagoda in his 1998 article "Ideas and Trends: In Cold Facts, Some Books Falter" observes that blurring the boundaries between standard journalism and fiction is not a new trend; he too builds his case predominantly on *A Journal of the Plague Year*. When the plague started, Defoe was only four, so he used historical material to create a fictional account, making the whole story more personal and imbued with artistic imagination. Yagoda's text is available at: *The New York Times on the Web*, (March 15, 1998), http://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/15