

Introduction

Newspapers and Modernist Events

[I]t is a more difficult thing to write history to make it anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in history you have everything, you have newspapers and the conversations and letter writing and the mystery stories and the audience and in every direction an audience that fits anything in every way in which an audience can fit itself to be anything.

—Gertrude Stein

One does not have to dig very deep to find references to the press in modernism. The reason for looking for those references, however, may seem less obvious. In fact, despite the frequency with which modernist writers, painters and film-makers refer to the news in their plots, use journalists as characters or images of newspapers, journalism as such is rarely given a central role in the historical processes that gave rise to modernism in the first place. It almost seems as if newspapers are too visible for one to notice how important they were. By being everywhere, they become banal, and this helps to explain why the press rarely appears at the same level as other phenomena that usually constitute the core of historical narratives from the late nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century: technological revolution, the growth of cities, changes in social perception with psychoanalysis and cinema – phenomena which are very close to the transformations occurring in the world of journalism during the same period, to such an extent that the latter can be seen as the mediation that gave the former their public configuration. In other words, we see the period mostly through the pervasive presence of journalistic discourses, and this is probably why the press itself remains largely unacknowledged.

More than a question of visibility or even of recognition, it seems that the problem here is one of discrepancy. One cannot say that newspapers are not there, it just seems that what they are shown doing in

novels, for instance, does not match the impact they end up having in plots. Neglecting newspapers and their overwhelming weight in the early twentieth-century public sphere is often used as a device to leave some room for the private, the domestic and the unconscious (and to show these in their permanent state of vulnerability). The press and the most commonsensical tropes around it – sensationalism, noise, recklessness – work in these circumstances as an important marker for the limits of what at the time could still be experienced in the realm of individual consciousness. A good example of this can be seen in a very discreet reference by Marcel Proust in *The Guermantes Way*, when the narrator suggests that ‘a large number of German café owners, simply by being impressed by a customer or a newspaper when they said that France, England and Russia were “provoking” Germany, made war possible at the time of Agadir’ (Proust 2000: 469).¹ *In Search of Lost Time* is not, of course, a novel immediately about its historical context, but the contradiction between the processes of memory and consciousness in the novel and the incommensurability of what is here discreetly, almost accidentally being said – the most terrible events in the period would not have taken place without the pressure of newspapers – may help historians to situate the historical role of journalism, not only politically (as a facilitator of wars) but also in the consciousness of contemporaries who, in this sense, would have necessarily been immersed in journalistic discourses. What such reference to the press suggests, in the discrepancy between the impact of newspapers in the historical context of modernism and its seeming insignificance within the novel, is that for contemporaries any affirmation of individual subjectivity would have to be able to resist that same immersion in journalism.

The particular role of the press in the grand narrative of modernity (or at least of modernism) thus seems to be limited primarily to the impact of newspapers in the period’s forms of perception. In particular, newspapers are usually seen as a key tool in the formation of mass public opinion and mass politics.² This may help explain Proust’s reserve in the specific context of *In Search of Lost Time*. Fortunately for us, that is, from the perspective of a historiographical approach to this particular form of discourse, other modern writers were much less discreet. Usually, the image of journalism given by modernists is very harsh, and Karl Kraus, in this context, probably is the most recognizable modernist critic of the press. In his own counter-newspaper *Die Fackel* or in the satirical play *The Last Days of Mankind*, Kraus dissected contemporary journalism, its inclination to be deceitful and the deterioration of language it promoted. The press as a decisive problem in early twentieth-century societies – and a major cause of the First World War – took up much of Kraus’s

writing and energy, and his critique deserves a study of its own.³ In particular, such a study would have to track down the comprehensive scrutiny to which Kraus submitted newspapers for decades, especially in *Die Fackel*, a newspaper against newspapers that challenged the daily press in its own terms. However, the distance permitted by literary devices in *The Last Days of Mankind* allows Kraus to take a step further, or better still, beyond the constraints of journalistic routines, and literally stage the inner mechanisms of the press and its impact on Austrian society on the eve of the First World War. The play stages a corrupt triangle formed by politicians putting pressure on journalists, journalists doing favours for politicians, and the journalistic fictions produced by this fraudulent system of information acquiring social existence by being reproduced by a gullible public.

The dialogues in the play prove particularly appropriate to show how discourses shape reality – and not the other way around – how common sense is made out of endless repetition, and how the truth emerges from absurd situations. One particular scene demonstrates both the manipulative power of reporters in transforming fictions into journalistic narratives, and Karl Kraus's literary ability in re-enacting the whole process. The episode describes an interview with Elfriede Ritter, an Austrian actress who had just arrived in Vienna from Russia. While she tries to describe how pleasant her Russian sojourn had been, the two journalists keep distorting her replies in order to instigate the state of belligerency between the two countries:

ELFRIEDE RITTER: ... the journey home was arduous, but not in the least stressful and ... I am delighted to be in my beloved Vienna.

JOURNALIST 2: An Arduous journey, she admits.

JOURNALIST 1: Stressful – Hang on, I wrote the first part of this in the office – (*writing*) Rescued from the torments of Russian bondage, after the completion of an arduous, stressful journey, actress Elfriede Ritter wept tears of joy at the thought of being, once again, in her beloved Vienna. [...]

ELFRIEDE RITTER: What are you trying to do – I cannot say –

JOURNALIST 1: She hardly dares say it.⁴

The manipulation is very exaggerated, one would almost say grotesque, but as Kraus insists in the appropriation of the actress's discourse by the two reporters, the procedures of journalistic interview are allowed to come forth. In other words, despite the obvious manipulation of the interviewee's declarations and the distance between her answers and how

reporters report them, this falsification is nonetheless done in the name of a certain transparency. At the end, she becomes completely caught in a dialogue where her ideas are strangely misrepresented by the literal transcription of her words:

JOURNALIST 2: My dear *Fräulein*, the public wants to read this, you can speak out. Perhaps not in Russia, but here thank God freedom of speech prevails, here you can say anything at all about conditions in Russia! Did any Russian newspaper pay you the kind of attention we are? Exactly! [...]

ELFRIEDE RITTER: But it's not true!

JOURNALIST 1 (*looking up*): Not – true? I'm taking down your every word! Do you suggest our papers would carry something that isn't true?

JOURNALIST 2: The casting committee will be meeting at the Burgtheater on Saturday, for *Faust*, and if I say anything about this to the director it will be *Fräulein Berger* who ends up playing Gretchen, I promise you! [...]

ELFRIEDE RITTER (*imploringly*): I only – wanted to tell the truth –

JOURNALIST 1 (*angry*): So we're lying, are we?

ELFRIEDE RITTER: As a woman I don't have the correct perspective sometimes – I'm just glad to have escaped from enemy soil – in one piece –

JOURNALIST 2: You see, now you're remembering, bit by bit.

The extract is intriguing at many different levels: in the way it raises issues of gender domination, nationalist consensus and the coercive force (professional, in this case) exerted by the press. But it also raises two other, less evident, issues, on which I would now like to focus. On the one hand, the question of what is true or false depends on the way journalists decide to organize their narrative from a careful selection of the words uttered by the actress. This is why although they are taking what she says completely out of context, their vexed reply ('So we're lying, are we?') is actually difficult to answer. On the other hand, the whole process of manipulation seems to be given a higher rationale when the reporter claims that it is not really he who wants to know the truth about her journey, but the public. This is a decisive aspect as it suggests that journalists respond primarily to the expectations of readers (or to what they imagine those expectations to be) and only afterwards to the events they report about.

The close relation between the two poles of this form of communication – reporters and newspaper readers – was a main point of concern for the modernist critique of newspapers. In *The Man Without Qualities*,

Robert Musil shows that while the reporters of a violent murder of a woman who suffered ‘stab wounds in the breast that penetrated the heart ... had expressed their revulsion at this, ... they did not stop until they had counted thirty-five stabs in the belly and explained the deep slash that reached from the navel to the sacrum, continuing up the back in numerous lesser cuts, while the throat showed marks of strangulation’ (Musil 1995: 67–68). In the gruesome details of the victim’s wounds, Musil replicates the hypocrisy of reporters that simultaneously censor and exploit the crime, but the real problem with this kind of journalistic narrative were those ‘thousands of people who deplore the sensationalism of the press’ but ‘were nevertheless more deeply preoccupied with it than with their own life’s work’ (Musil 1995: 68). A chain of deceit, one might say: no one, from reporters to readers, seemed to endorse the display of violence, and yet all seemed to indulge in it. But more than sensationalism and the impact of journalistic dramatization on public opinion as such – fueling fear and violence – what seemed truly dangerous from the perspective of most writers was the way journalism, given the short span of the news and the brevity of its narratives, oversimplified reality, reducing politics to Manichean schema, polarizing social conflict and ultimately narrowing the horizons of readership. In other words, if the press was at all able to instigate hatred and drive a whole society into war, this was not only because it spread violence and drama but also because, by doing so, it disabled readers from imagining anything beyond that same violence and drama.

Imagine Plato was alive today, Musil proposes in another moment in his novel. He ‘would certainly be ecstatic about a news industry capable of creating, exchanging, refining a new idea every day’ (Musil 1995: 352). Conversely, with its inclination to novelties, the press would surely be willing to make a ‘tremendous sensation’ with him: ‘If he were then capable of writing a volume of philosophical travel pieces in three weeks, and a few thousand of his well-known short stories, perhaps even turn one or the other of his older works into a film, he could undoubtedly do very well for himself for a considerable period of time’. However:

The moment his return had ceased to be news ... and Mr Plato tried to put into practice one of his well-known ideas, which had never quite come into their own, the editor in chief would ask him to submit only a nice little column on the subject now and then for the Life and Leisure section (but in the easiest and most lively style possible, not heavy: remember the readers). (Musil 1995: 352)

The power of newspapers in shaping the ideas of German café owners, manipulating Elfriede Ritter’s words, or describing the number of stabs in a victim’s body created the predisposition to violence that, to

many contemporaries, stood as one of the main causes of the First World War. And yet, tragic as it may have been, this was just a single event amidst the daily impact of the press in the dramatization of social perceptions. The real problem was the way this dramatization took place on a daily basis – and not just on tragic occasions – and how reality itself ultimately became covered by the language of the press. Trouble started with the fact that any perception of reality was created by journalistic discourse, in itself a corrupted form of language at the service of political interests and, even worse, the business of newspapers.⁵ One can understand the critique of modernist writers like Karl Kraus and Robert Musil in this context: given the overwhelming presence of the press in society, only literature seemed able to counter the complete blur between reality and the discourses of journalism. Stéphane Mallarmé also suggests this: the corrupted language of the everyday had journalistic origins (it had become ‘universal reportage’) and human thought was reduced to an exchanged commodity. Only literature could retrieve ideas and their words from total reification:

Narrate, teach, even describe, that’s fine and even if it were enough for each of us perhaps, in order to exchange human thought, to take from or place in the hand of someone else a coin in silence, the elementary use of discourse serves the needs of universal *reportage*, of which, with the exception of literature, all the genres of contemporary writings contain elements. (Mallarmé 1998: 368)⁶

This was more than just hostility towards the press. Language seemed to be under threat and literature the only form capable of preserving it from the corruption of journalism. This is surely an interesting way to approach the study of modernism, in its games with common sense, its struggle against realism and the questioning of language, and also, probably above all else, in the way many modernist novels – *In Search of Lost Time* and *The Man Without Qualities* being good examples – resisted the quick temporality of the daily press. In the insistent inquiry of the past or in the lengthy analysis of the present in all its different aspects, these novels can be seen as desperate efforts to keep something from being lost in the fleeting succession of daily information.

So, if the problem was time, then it necessarily had historical implications. According to Musil, this could be seen in the fact that, though ‘much was happening’, at least if one believed what came in the press, ‘two years or five years earlier there had also been much excitement, everyday had had its sensations’ (Musil 1995: 390). In other words, with excitement being delivered on a daily basis, one would lose the sense of the past, as in such circumstances ‘it was hard, not to say impossible, to remember what it was that had actually happened’ (Musil 1995: 390).

Strangely, then, but as Mallarmé already suspected, newspapers, which were supposed to give their readers the true picture of modernity, were in fact cancelling the ability to perceive time elapsing and thus emptying history as a form of progress:

What a strange business history was! We could safely say of this or that event that it had already found its place in history, or certainly would find it; but whether this event had actually taken place was not so sure! Because for anything to happen, it has to happen at a certain date and not at some other date or even not at all; also, the thing itself has to happen and not by chance something merely approximating it or something related. But this is precisely what no one can say of history, unless he happens to have written it down at the time, as newspapers do. (Musil 1995: 390)

The modern press was contemporaneous with the birth of historiography, and yet journalism is here shown as an obstacle to historical awareness. According to the modernist critique, the question seems to be: when something happens every day (or, according to the epigraph taken from Gertrude Stein, when ‘everything’ can now become history), how can we select what is worthy of becoming historical, let alone trust if what was registered in newspapers has happened at all? Our modernist novels can in this sense be seen as a struggle against the press for historical consciousness, or at least for the ability to seize it. The choice of newspapers as one of the main targets in these writers’ critique of the times is thus very symptomatic, for it illustrates how deeply historically aware modernism was. More precisely, if modernism can be seen as a response to modernity, itself a form of historical consciousness – rather than a historical period in the strict sense – then whatever threatened the status of history could not fail to become one of its main concerns.

Modernist Events

The two threats posed by journalism – to communication and to the perception of time – suggests that the crisis of modernism can be located simultaneously in the realm of language and in the realm of history. By criticizing the press as an active agent in a generalized deterioration of discourse, modernism situates itself historically as both a critique and a form of regeneration. Furthermore, by treating contemporaneous journalism as a modern experience, rather than just a discourse about modernity, modernism gives the press a new historical density. For the press, unhistorical as it may have been, had a concrete impact on social relations and political events. This is one of the initial problems this book has to come to terms with: newspapers – in particular between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth – were key agents

in a historical break within the discursive regime of realism, in which narrative and reality unambiguously played the roles of each other's subject and object.⁷ When reality ceased to be readable outside discursive mediation, to give an account of events one has to start considering the circulation of discourses as a fundamental aspect of events materially unfolding through social life. For Hayden White, this is what introduces the possibility to think of modernist events, which would necessarily involve the need of a modernist historiography somehow able to constitute the appropriate narrative of modern life. Following Eric Auerbach's notion of literary figuration, White defines this form of historicism as an account where the fulfilment of a historical event – say, what we traditionally call progress – could be related to previous events in the same way literary fulfilments are related to figures in narratives.⁸ Progress would then be the figuration of narrative, rather than historical, causality, whereas historiography would necessarily become metahistory.

However, when White tries to define what a modernist event could look like, he still seems too close to the modernist critique we have been analysing. White starts by pointing out how modern media, rather than a heuristic opening into contemporaneity, constitutes on the contrary what modernist historiography must overcome in order to become the historiographic genre of modernity. Modernist events – figured as 'holocaustal', including the violence of world wars and nuclear weapons, but also 'communications technology' (White 1999: 70) – thus emerge as complex units with 'potentially infinite' details and an 'infinitely extensive' (White 1999: 71) context, whose complexities are simplified, and thus falsified, on a daily basis by the media. 'It is fortunate, therefore, that we have in the work of one of the greatest of modernist writers a theorization of this problem', White (White 1999: 82) tells us: the writer is Gertrude Stein, and the problem – the obstacle to a proper historical narrative of modern life – is the press:

In real life that is if you like in the newspapers which are not real life but real life with the reality left out, the reality being the inside and the newspapers being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside except in the rare and peculiar cases when the outside breaks through to be inside because the outside is so part of some inside that even a description of the outside cannot completely relieve the outside of the inside. (Stein 1998: 347)

We have already seen that Stein, Musil and other modernist writers had common opinions about newspapers. What is new here is the way Hayden White not only incorporates the linguistic challenge of modernism in his historiographical reflection, but also how he embarks on a similar critique of journalism. White's dismissal represents in this sense

a decisive challenge to a book like this, trying to come to terms with the historicity of newspapers. The challenge to history posed in my epigraph, on the other hand, may now become clearer: history would have to come to terms with a world covered by newspapers in a pure exteriority where ‘everything is happening’ so constantly and so visibly as to make ‘real life’s reality’ – the inside of which newspapers would be the outside – invisible. A hierarchy of forms of perception and representation may then come forth: the ‘everything’ of newspapers from where history must retrieve ‘anything’ ‘is an important enough thing for seeing but it is not an important enough thing for writing’ (White 1999: 84). The world experienced through the press is represented as an impoverished experience (here related to the order of images rather than of written words). Against richer forms of experience not subsumed under the transparent immediacy of journalism’s image of reality, newspapers could not but deceive. Stein assumes two things: on the one hand, that reality only matches its empty appearance in ‘rare and peculiar cases’; and on the other hand, that what journalism lacks in order to faithfully represent reality is the capacity to narrate it, for if reality is an inner process with beginnings and endings, then the punchy images of immediacy⁹ produced by newspapers on a daily basis cannot but obstruct understanding.

History would then be the written form capable of transcending the mischievous power of images, an ability which, according to White, could only be attained if historians were willing to somehow ‘collapse the distinction’ between ‘its form and its semantic content’ (White 1999: 85) in the same way Gertrude Stein manages to do in her writings. However, even if we accept the highly problematic idea that there is a truer reality waiting to be rescued by proper narratives beyond the disarray of everyday images, something probably much more decisive would still remain overlooked: the extent to which modernity already is materially constituted by the circulation of images and discourses. In other words, whatever the real is, it always happens through the mediation of visibility – those rare and peculiar moments Stein talks about seem the rule rather than the exception. Consequently, I would like to argue, the history of this visibility is in itself what should come forth as the true challenge to modern historians.

This book will take onboard much of modernism’s critique of the press – it will pay attention to its temporal brevity and to its ability to ‘invent’ a reality of its own – and the hypothesis of a modernist event put forward by Hayden White, but it chooses a different path: to work with newspapers rather than against them. This does not mean that the journalistic narratives we are going to analyse will be read literally, at face value, as many modern historians using newspapers as historical sources

do. Rather, I will try to look at those narratives as specific forms of experience and, as such, as historical objects in their own right. Paraphrasing White, it is fortunate, therefore, that we have in the work of some of the greatest modernist writers, and artists, a theorization of this problem: authors who also dealt with the press aesthetically by allowing it to contaminate their own narratives, the structure of their canvas and the rhythm of their films (and not only by using it as a sort of character in their plots). At this level, the role of the press becomes much more complex, because, rather than dismissing it along the two lines of the critique we are already familiar with – the temporal chaos of innumerable events and the deteriorated language of mass consensus – these works see the press as a particularly challenging object of representation precisely as a result of the innumerable events and mass production of discourse. In other words, chaos, consensus, manipulation, violence, randomness, brevity and so on do not suddenly disappear from the picture, as if the alternative was a more benign picture of journalism. It just so happens that all those aspects are seen as concrete phenomena that all modern narratives – literary or historical – necessarily have to come to terms with.

At this point, we can make a qualitative move from the reading of discourses about the press in modernist novels to the analysis of some cases where the form of newspapers constituted a model for modernist aesthetic creation. In fact, more than the use of news in plots or the caricature of newspapers and journalists, the press imposed the structural conditions of the period's forms of perception. To start with, with the circulation of newspapers, narratives themselves could be seen as objects in motion. Circulation, on the other hand, necessarily meant that this particular form of narrative was being written and read collectively. Many narratives in circulation, many readers sharing the same news: the first challenge to the history of this object is how to describe the simultaneity of all these disparate, distant things. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, it seems that Dostoevsky shared the same problem: in fact, 'the possibility of simultaneous coexistence' was a key feature in the writer's 'worldview' (Bakhtin 1984: 29). The idea of 'simultaneous coexistence' had implications in the novelist's abstract definition of phenomena – it was, for instance, what allowed him to distinguish 'the essential from the nonessential', according to Bakhtin – but, above all, it was what defined 'his artistic perception of the world: only in the category of coexistence could he see and represent the world' (Bakhtin 1984: 29). Now, this world of simultaneous things, made of many simultaneous voices, was something that only became visible to Dostoevsky on 'the newspaper page as a living reflection of the contradictions of contemporary society in the cross-section of a single day, where the most diverse and

contradictory material is laid out, extensively, side by side and one side against the other' (Bakhtin 1984: 30). A 'living reflection': here, newspapers are finally allowed to emerge as privileged sources for the study of modern societies, not by showing how people were led to think (as Proust seemed to suggest, in his advice to modern historians), but, on the contrary, by showing the many different thoughts in circulation in societies immersed in journalistic discourses.

Rosalind Kraus recovers 'the polyphony that Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky [*sic*]' in her own analysis of Picasso's use of newspaper fragments in his cubist collages. Kraus goes to great lengths to counter the usual interpretations that try to read the painting's meaning in the particular news one can read in Picasso's newspaper clippings. Instead, what she sees in the combination of pieces of newspaper with other objects is a true 'whirl of signifiers' in which the press becomes a sign in circulation, rather than a particular meaning or even a symbol:

The polyphony that Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky ... is what we have seen happen characterizing Picasso's circulation of the sign. And this whirl of signifiers reforming in relation to each other and reorganizing their meanings seemingly out of nothing, in an almost magical disjunction from reality, this manipulation at the level of the structure, can also be appreciated ... at the level of the textual representation of the 'voice'. Each voice, in dialogue at least with itself, is doubled and dramatized by becoming the voice of another. (Kraus 1999: 47–48)

This proves particularly challenging, as it seems to imply that words, or written objects, have to be treated like images, or at least handled in their visual form. Understandably, the temptation to read the words and take the meaning from them is almost irresistible. However, if one manages, even if briefly, to treat those clippings as signs, rather than news proper, it may then become possible to picture a multiplicity of polyphonic voices where, rather than 'the object who speaks' – that is, newspapers – we move 'to the object who is journalistically spoken': a whole system of circulation where the news can be seen beyond the chaos of events or normative consensus. In these circumstances, the press becomes an object in circulation – a very special object, to be sure, as in it discourse and the material presence in the world coincide. But this is precisely what allows for these 'signifiers' to enter 'in vivid enough circulation to trigger the constellation of signifieds' (Kraus 1999: 85). In conclusion, only circulation can produce meaning, or, in other words, meaning can only emerge in 'the conversation that circulates in [a] polyphonic space' (Kraus 1999: 85).¹⁰

My suggestion at this point is that the 'constellation of signifieds', something newspapers are able to encapsulate with the proviso that one treats them as narratives in motion, has become, not exactly a model, but

indeed the infrastructure of many modernist works. At this level, the impact of newspapers must be grasped in formal aspects like the temporality of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or the rhythm of Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). To start with, this is because these works seem to find it hard to conceive of human experience outside the daily unit organized by the press. Even more decisively, the whole synthesis of many different voices and disparate objects in circulation juxtaposed within the space of the city throughout the twenty-four hours of a single day (and both the day and the city constitute the spatio-temporal structure of the newspaper) produce the perfect setting to re-enact the polyphonic voices Rosalind Kraus identified in Picasso's collages. Moreover, the language of montage as the appropriate narrative technique to render simultaneity – something those urban symphonies skillfully demonstrate – may also prove a productive tool with which to think about newspapers: the multiplicity of news in a single edition and the circulation of that same edition's many different copies throughout the day.

In this context, John Dos Passos's *USA* probably constitutes the best example of a modernist work where the circulation of voices triggered by the press is ostensibly embodied by the structure of the narrative. The novel can in this sense be seen as a piece of montage where different characters are shown in parallel (sometimes intersecting) with a series of different discourses and events in the background setting the conditions in which those characters not only experienced the historical period, but were indeed able to perceive it. The fact that these discourses and events are presented through the terminology of film – in sections titled 'Newsreel' and 'The Camera Eye' – should not be seen to contradict my hypothesis, for, as I will be insisting throughout this book, cinema itself participated in the whole journalistic structure of perception. 'Newsreel 35' (Dos Passos 2001: 618) can be seen as a good example of this:

the Grand Prix de La Victoire run yesterday for fifty-second time was an event that will long remain in the memories of those present, for never in the history of the classic race has Longchamps presented such a glorious scene

Keep the home fires burning
Till the boys come home

LEVIATHAN UNABLE TO PUT TO SEA
BOLSHEVIKS ABOLISH POSTAGE STAMPS
ARTIST TAKES GAS IN NEW HAVEN
FIND BLOOD ON \$1 BILL

While our hearts are yearning

POTASH CAUSE A BREAK IN PARLEY
 MAJOR DIES OF POISONING
 TOOK ROACH SALTS BY MISTAKE

riot and robbery developed into the most awful pogrom ever heard of. Within two or three days the Lemberg Ghetto was turned into heaps of smoking debris. Eyewitnesses estimate that the Polish soldiers killed more than a thousand Jewish men and women and children

LENIN SHOT BY TROTSKY IN DRUNKEN BRAWL

you know where I stand on beer, said Brisbane in seeking assistance
Though the boys are far away
They long for home
There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining

Some of these pieces of news evoke our initial critiques of the press, in the way *everything* is treated at the same level, or when things are just made up (Trotsky never shot Lenin). And yet, it should be clear by now that this is not how one should read newspapers from a historical perspective. For the meaning being produced here is whatever emerges from the juxtaposition of different forms, the random succession of discourse (one could even ask whether it is a question of meaning in the strict sense, or something closer to the idea of rhythm or even atmosphere). Newspapers thus seem to encapsulate the whole of social experience not because they systematize everything, but precisely to the extent in which modern reality is perceived as random and inarticulate. Tristan Tzara's 'To Make a Dadaist Poem' can in this sense be presented as the ultimate modernist account of the journalistic structure of the modern world:

Take a newspaper / Take some scissors / Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem / Cut out the article / Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag / Shake gently / Next take out each cutting one after the other / Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag / The poem will resemble you. (Lewis 2007: 107).

'The poem will resemble you': and yet, there is a limit to the arbitrariness with which the image of this particular subject – the poet whose work was a collection of newspaper clippings – is produced. For those words would not have been reassembled in the poem by themselves. The image of the poet was the outcome of a process of cutting, shaking, alignment, copying and, eventually, reading. It may seem a minor detail in the poem, but the consequences to the apprehension of what newspapers do to the world (and to the way the historical status of newspapers is analysed in this book) are decisive: both the random circulation of words and the emergence of meaning are produced in a negotiation between

journalists and readers. In other words, if circulation really plays such a central role in the way newspapers work, then we have to take the image of polyphonic voices to its ultimate consequence and include the public, that is, virtually everyone, in the process of production of this particular cultural object.

Narratives in Motion

Like Hayden White, several other authors have asked historians to shift the structure of their narratives from realism, still seen as the literary paradigm of most historiography, to modernism. The reasoning, as we have seen, is simple and, apparently, fair: if modernity represents a specific historical situation with its own problems and challenges, then historiographic discourse should keep up and adapt its narrative forms to historic change (just as modernist literature had done, and precisely for the same reason).¹¹ I am afraid this book will not match these expectations. However, I would like to argue, it will try to do something equally challenging. In the chapters that follow, journalistic narratives will be exposed to other literary forms and confronted with their own context of circulation, from production to reception. In this sense, the book will try to estrange the logic of the news and, hopefully, bring forth, not exactly what newspapers said, but the meaning they were allowed to produce in specific circumstances.

‘Estrangement’ is of course a procedure with a Brechtian resonance. Georges Didi-Huberman (2009) has recently analysed Bertolt Brecht’s journals, in which the German author assembled newspaper clippings and other images and texts in order to unveil historical contradictions (in the context of the Second World War).¹² By tracking down the whole information process and, even more decisively, by confronting several journalistic narratives with each other and with other literary forms, my aim is, just like in Didi-Huberman, ‘to *break up* the falsifying configuration of newspapers and to recompose or *reassemble* the factual elements released by the illustrated press and filmic newsreel on their own terms’ (Didi-Huberman 2009: 19). The combination of text and image, or of narratives and other narratives, corresponds, according to Didi-Huberman, to the technique of montage. This relationship with cinema at the level of method – both in Didi-Huberman and Brecht – is important as it evokes the form of confrontation I find most productive in the analysis of this particular object: that between the press and film. Each chapter in this book can in this sense be seen as an attempt to short-circuit the linearity of the news by breaking up the latter’s different elements and

reassembling them in my own narrative. And yet, as we will see later, journalists themselves thought their work had strong affinities with that of film-makers. We thus have to emphasize the constructivist aspect of the method, to make sure these relationships are not seen as reproducing discourses that already existed in the past, as if waiting for us to reassemble them. In other words, to contrast different objects comes here as a historiographic move, a narrative technique to disclose the contradictions hidden beneath the discourses of the press and, as such, allow history to appear, as Fredric Jameson would put it:

We must therefore retain this violence and negativity in any concept of intersection, in order for this dissonant conjunction to count as an Event, and in particular as that Event which is the ephemeral rising up and coming to appearance of Time and History as such. Nor is this a purely textual or philosophical matter: for *it is the same* discordant conjunction that constitutes the emergence of time and of history in the real world. (Jameson 2009: 544)

Each chapter in this book in this sense focuses on journalistic reportage in relation to both other narrative forms and the historical context. The only chapter that does not focus on a specific event and its journalistic reporting analyses a silent film made in 1928 about the making of a newspaper, thus reversing the usual order of the narratives –reassembling events from journalistic reports – and transforming the process of production of a daily edition into an event in its own right. But before moving on to short presentations of the different chapters, three clarifications are in order. The first has to do with the book's periodization. Although Chapters 1 and 7 establish the narrative's temporal markers (a front page from 1890 and a cultural process unfolding from the mid 1920s until the late 1930s, respectively), the book's main focus is on the 1920s, here understood as an identifiable period, at least from the perspective of the history of the press and of reportage as a journalistic genre. The order of chapters is not, in this sense, organized chronologically, but accordingly to the evolution of my own argument about the impact of reportage as a narrative technique.¹³

The second clarification concerns the book's geographical and historical setting. All events described in this book took place in Portugal, and every newspaper and journalist here mentioned is Portuguese. And yet, Portuguese history as such is not what is most relevant here, as the events under analysis – a flight, a football match, a film, a crime and a strike – could have taken place in any other country or society, at least the ones undergoing similar processes of modernization. The book's 'country', so to speak, is that of journalism and modernity, or, better still, of the development of specific forms of narrative and perception in the context of

urbanization and cultural industrialization. However, the reader unfamiliar with Portugal will of course be better equipped to contextualize those events if they have a general sense of the broader history of the country between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

As in other contemporary European nations, in Portugal this was a period of dramatic political breaks and social transformations. The book starts with a crisis in 1890 that would trigger a profound questioning of the country's institutions and historical narratives, particularly its imperial vocation. The impact of 1890 (in many ways similar to the 1898 Spanish–American War, which led to the loss of colonies and a moral and intellectual crisis in Spain) would resonate well into twentieth century Portugal: the fall of the monarchy and the creation of a republican regime in 1910, the country's participation in the First World War from 1916 onwards, or even the fall of the Portuguese Republic and the beginning of the long period of authoritarian rule in 1926 (that would last until 1974) can be seen as after-effects of that initial crisis. In short, all these events were part of the crisis of political liberalism and liberal institutions that drove so many other countries to adopt fascism.

However, none of these political breaks are truly comprehensible outside the context of the deeper social transformations occurring at the same time. In fact, the succession of political regimes – from monarchy to republic and fascism – can to a large extent be seen as the consequence of the pressure exerted on the political system by industrialization, urbanization and social and cultural massification. The emergence of an industrial working class and the mass participation of new social strata in the public sphere – proletarians, lower middle classes and women, for example – will render the country's politics more dramatic and more polarized, especially in the context of the 1920s, when the postwar economic crisis and working class struggles (with the formation of a strong anarcho-syndicalist movement) would coalesce in the fall of the Republic. Ultimately, the nationalist revolution of 1926 and later (from 1933) the *Estado Novo* – the dictatorial regime led by António de Oliveira Salazar – can be seen as conservative responses to the challenges all the new social actors and political events posed to the historical perception of the country's elites.

This is where journalism becomes so decisive not only as a privileged document of contemporary phenomena, but as a key social actor in its own right, a mass cultural form contributing both to the democratization of the public sphere and, later, to the hegemony of authoritarian ideas. In other words, democratization can be equated with the growth of newspaper readership whereas authoritarianism can be read as a journalistic narrative. In this sense, the press allows us to analyse the historical process

beyond political history as such (monarchy, republic, dictatorship) and reverse the usual relation between political events and journalistic discourses (where the latter are treated as a consequence of the former). Accordingly, the different political regimes can here be seen as a consequence of transformations in the orders of discourse established by the press and of the impact of journalistic styles in the political sphere throughout the historical period in question.

My final clarification stems directly from the historicity that will guide my analysis of journalism in 1920s Portugal. For, in the same way that the chronology of events and the role of newspapers will be autonomous from the chronology and protagonists of political history, so were the authors the reader will meet throughout this book chosen according to their visibility in the public sphere organized around journalism. In this regard, the reader unfamiliar with Portuguese culture will not be at a disadvantage, for these writers and journalists, in most cases, have been forgotten, and do not form part of the literary canon. Their disappearance from the country's cultural memory tends, in this sense, to be inversely proportional to their renown in Portuguese public life during the 1920s.

Chapter 1 works as a methodological introduction to my reading of newspapers. It provides a close reading of a newspaper edition reporting on a major political event in Portuguese modern history (the British Ultimatum of 1890) and shows how the coverage of that specific event was not in fact the most spectacular piece of news the newspaper reported on that day. The front page contained another story, that of the suicide of one of the newspaper's most important feuilletonists – popular authors of feuilletons, a section of fictional or critical texts that was easily distinguishable from the information section in newspapers. A comparison of these two stories allows me to reflect upon questions of circulation and visibility as two key aspects of the reading of newspapers, and to mobilize categories from art history and visual studies as the tools for my analysis of newspaper narratives as protagonists in modern experience.

This first attempt to read a newspaper edition in detail (and taking into account the different aspects involved in the production of the news) proves useful in the following analyses. Chapter 2 focuses on the circulation of news concerning the first flight across the South Atlantic by Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral in 1922, and the public reaction to the event in Lisbon. Journalists had to base their reports on a constant but unreliable flow of telegraphic information coming from several islands, as well as from ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Readers, on the other hand, attempted to experience the event simultaneously by following telegraphic information as it was updated and displayed on newspaper billboards. The chapter also identifies aviation and the figure of the

aviator as an important topic of Portuguese modernist fiction, especially in novels and short stories published by modernist journalists.

The figure of the aviator as a kind of sportsman – and especially the public image of Sacadura Cabral produced by the press – introduces the body and its visual representation as a key feature of early twentieth-century journalism. In Chapter 3, the history of modern sport is told in parallel with an account of the proliferation of printed images in newspapers and other publications, as they feed on each other. A specific sporting event, a football match between the national teams of Spain and Portugal in 1925, will show how, on the one hand, sport had become a journalistic spectacle, and on the other how journalism struggled, in the 1920s, to produce narratives of events whose visual nature and mobility seemed more suitable to filmic representation.

The efforts made by reporters to provide a written account of moving images had a counterpart in a film produced in 1928 on the making of an edition of *Diário de Notícias*, one of Portugal's leading newspapers. This is the main object of Chapter 4. Organizing its narrative around twenty-four hours in the life of a city – like so many other urban symphonies of contemporary cinema – the film's editing enables it to reconstitute the different layers of journalism: reporters searching for events, machines printing newspapers, peddlers and trains distributing the newspaper, and readers simultaneously being informed of the news. The film represents the power of modern art to materialize narratives in everyday life. This form of power can also be seen in modernist feuilletons, where journalists insistently deployed the imaginary of film in the representation of women and their bodies (reporters as lenses focusing on filmic bodies) to not only dramatize the narration of the historical context, but also to enhance the material impact of narratives.

The reporting of a murder of an actress by her lover in 1925 described in Chapter 5 shows how the female body became an object of literary exploitation – that is, one of its principal resources – and journalistic sensationalism. The book takes a political turn here, in two ways: on the one hand, the representation of women in newspapers in both the news and feuilletons enacts a system of power that reproduces in written form the 'split between [the] active/male [gaze] and passive/female [body]' as identified by Laura Mulvey in film (Mulvey 1975: 11). On the other hand, the fictional representation of the female body defined a social division of labour between an elite of modernist journalists who wrote feuilletons and a lower class of professionals who published erotic pulp fiction.

In Chapter 6 the social and cultural gap separating modernist journalists from an intellectual proletariat formed by typesetters and the lower

ranks of journalism is interpreted through the analysis of a number of fictional utopias and dystopias written by journalists in the 1920s, in which the political horizon of expectations of the period is represented. This allows me to introduce my last modernist event: a strike by journalists and typesetters. The lack of newspapers in Lisbon for a period of several months in 1921 triggered a near-revolutionary situation. If, as the book's narrative demonstrates, modern reality was mediated and perceived through the movement and image of events produced by newspapers, the strike gave rise to a feeling of social collapse.

Lastly, Chapter 7 reflects upon newspaper articles and pictures produced on the subject of their own role in not only producing the perception of modern reality, but also in organizing social and political life. The press, I argue, presents itself as an industrial accumulation of events and, as such, as a modern archive of reality. In a final twist of the narrative, I will try to show how this form of accumulation was the origin of a new idea of culture in the 1930s, which, despite its activism against authoritarianism, can also be seen as the emergence of a new intellectual norm and cultural discipline. In conclusion, I will discuss Friedrich Kittler's notions of information storage and discourse network (Kittler 1990) to argue that newspapers are prime historical examples of both these ideas.

Notes

1. Proust continues, with a recommendation to historians: 'Historians, if they have not been wrong to abandon the practice of attributing the actions of peoples to the will of kings, ought to substitute for the latter the psychology of the individual, the inferior individual at that' (Proust 2000: 469).
2. Antonio Gramsci identified a key philosophical event in this: 'for a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a "philosophical" event far more important and "original" than the discovery by some philosophical "genius" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971: 327).
3. One of the best analyses of Kraus's 'great battle' against the press is that of Bouveresse (2001); see also Reitter (2008).
4. All quoted passages from *The Last Days of Mankind* come from Act 1, Scene 14 (see Kraus 2013).
5. Although modern newspapers always had a commercial component (both as a product to be sold and a vehicle for advertising), the relation between the press and business was frequently criticized, as if its commercial aspect was incompatible with the neutrality of information. Walter Benjamin, in his Arcades project, saw this relation as a key aspect of the nineteenth-century need for novelties: 'Just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty. Newspapers flourish, along with *magasins de nouveautés*.

- The press organizes the market in spiritual values, in which at first there is a boom' (Benjamin 2002: 11).
6. Here too, the key issue was of course the way in which universal reportage was undermining the ability of readers to focus on things: 'I prefer, in the face of this aggression, to respond that some contemporaries do not know how to read – Except newspapers; of course these provide the advantage of not interrupting the chorus of [daily] distractions' (Mallarmé 1998: 386).
 7. Hayden White situates this break – championed by modernism – in the crisis of the nineteenth-century historical novel, when the model based on 'the presumed capacity of the reader to distinguish between real and imaginary events', 'fact and fiction', and 'life and literature', was put into question (White 1999: 67).
 8. 'In this respect, then, to say, for example, that a given historical event is a fulfillment of an earlier one is not to say that the prior event caused or determined the later event or that the later event is the actualization or effect of the prior one. It is to say that historical events can be related to one another in the way that a figure is related to its fulfillment in a narrative or a poem' (White 1999: 89).
 9. 'Therefore in real life it is the crime and as the newspaper has to feel about as if it were in the act of seeing or doing it, they cannot really take on detecting they can only take on the crime, they cannot take on anything that makes on beginning and ending and in the detecting end of detective stories there is nothing but going on beginning and ending' (Stein 1998: 42).
 10. 'From the subject who speaks, to the object who is journalistically "spoken", Picasso joins the conversation that circulates in the polyphonic space of the collages. But his is only one voice, itself bifurcated. Many other voices attach to these speakers, all of them doubling or tripling from within. A small amount of text will do it ... [T]he collages have just enough meaning for the circulation of the sign, while the signifiers are in vivid enough circulation to trigger the constellation of the signified' (Kraus 1999: 85).
 11. Eric Auerbach, Hayden White, Fredric Jameson and Jacques Rancière seem to agree about the modernist writer who should become the model for historians: Virginia Woolf. Despite their differences about the historical situation modernist historiography responds to (the modernist event, in White; 'the surging of countless millions of new subjects', in Jameson; or 'democratic disorder', in Rancière), all recognize in the narrative structures of *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs Dalloway* the expression of 'the random contingency of real phenomena', as Auerbach puts it (White 1999; Auerbach 1953: 538; Jameson 2009: 515; Rancière 1994: 100).
 12. 'The key and most powerful form of estrangement in his *ABC of War* involves establishing a link (*tirer un trait d'union*), quick as a lightning strike, between images of the crime and poetry texts' (Didi-Huberman 2009: 44).
 13. In *In 1926*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht identified a series of figures, events and narratives that contemporaries would recognize as typical traces of the 1920s – reporters were of course among them. To focus comprehensively on a specific year allowed the author to treat it as a synecdoche of the larger period (Gumbrecht 1997).