

HISTORY OR JOURNALISM: TWO NARRATIVE PARADIGMS IN
BLOODY SUNDAY. SCENES FROM THE SAVILLE INQUIRY BY RICHARD
NORTON-TAYLOR

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on one of the most controversial plays in contemporary Irish theatre, Richard Norton-Taylor's *Bloody Sunday. Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*. The play belongs to the popular form of drama called verbatim or documentary and attempts to render factual material and recorded evidence about the Bloody Sunday tragedy in a possibly most objective and reliable way. The aim of the article is to present Norton-Taylor's work against the long and interesting tradition of the genre of documentary theatre. What is more, the central subject of the analysis is the complex interconnection between journalistic methods of rendering facts and strictly fictional strategies – such as for instance metaphor, metonymy or synecdoche – which according to Hayden White belong to modern historical discourse. The seamless blurring of journalism and elements of historical writing makes it possible for Norton-Taylor to maintain realistic objectivity of the medium, while still holding the reader's interpretations and understanding under politicised and ideologically biased control.

1. Documentary drama and its history

Richard Norton-Taylor's new play *Bloody Sunday. Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* is one of the most recent productions from London's Tricycle Theatre. First performed in April 2005, the play belongs to the Verbatim Inquiry series, a string of documentary works tackling most contentious issues in recent politics and public life. Other highly controversial plays coming from the Tricycle were among others: *Half the picture*, a dramatization of the Scott Arms to Iraq Inquiry (performed in the Houses of Parliament), two war documents, *Nürnberg* and *Srebrnica*, and a number of what came to be known as Tricycle Tribunal Plays, *The colour of justice*, a reconstruction of Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, *Justifying*

war (2003),¹ *Guantanamo. 'Honour bound to defend freedom'* (2004)² and finally *Bloody Sunday*. However, the revival of inquiry dramas was not only one theatre's business. There are other documentary plays from known writers and playwrights which confront issues not necessarily connected with recent British and American military operations. For instance, David Hare's theatrical document called *Permanent way* tells a story of the privatization of British Rail (2003). Yet, since verbatim theatre desperately strives to exert most profound influence on possibly the vastest audiences, subjects chosen for dramatization are usually those of global scale and concern. An example to be noted is another play by David Hare, called *Stuff happens*, which paints a bitter picture of the hypocrisy of the American administration in managing the military operation in Iraq. The title of the play, *Stuff happens*, is taken from a speech by Donald Rumsfeld who was commenting on the plundering of the archaeological museum in Bagdad just after capturing the city by the American army.

In the assessment of many commentators, verbatim theatre occupies the middle ground between a presentation of true and verifiable facts and the manipulative political propaganda. The history of verbatim theatre goes back to the 1920s when Erwin Piscator experimented with authentic film footage and documents used as integral components of a theatre spectacle. Later on, Bertolt Brecht developed these techniques into a full-blown agit-prop theatre of alienation and distance. The notable examples of this genre of theatrical document from the British Isles are Joan Littlewood's *Oh, what a lovely war* produced by the Theatre Workshop (1963) and Peter Brook's famous anti-Vietnam theatrical manifesto *US* (1966). In general, verbatim theatre is composed from words and sentences spoken in real life, it is supposed to retain the freshness and directness of a daily newspaper as well as provide space for more balanced and objective reflection on current issues. What is more, verbatim theatre exists in opposition to the public media which are generally perceived as biased in giving opinionated views instead of facts. Inquiry dramas are meant to serve as a remedy and provide facts, leaving the audience with the material on which to form their own opinions. Yet, most often documentary drama is only a heavily edited selection of authentic documents and published records. It is a necessary compromise with the wealth of material which could not be included for reasons of limited time or space. Further on, a documentary play's selection and compilation of presented incidents is very often politically motivated or at least reflects ideological prejudices of its creators. Consequently, verbatim theatre is also com-

¹ The play dramatizes the investigation into the political campaign which led to the attack on Iraq and the subsequent death of the weapons of mass destruction expert David Kelly.

² *Guantanamo* presents interviews with British citizens unlawfully detained in the notorious US camp.

monly perceived as a reconstruction of events whose balance in rendering facts may be heavily affected not by a deep commitment to truth but by a current political situation.

Norton-Taylor's *Bloody Sunday. Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* offers a selection of interviews with civilians, soldiers and local politicians who were involved in the tragic march of 1972 in Londonderry when 13 civil-rights protesters were shot dead by British soldiers. Saville Inquiry was set up by Tony Blair in 1998 as part of the Northern Irish Peace Process, and during four years of intense hearings it recorded evidence from over one thousand witnesses. The drama presented by Norton-Taylor is a typical tribunal play recreating the room in which the hearings were held. What is more, the testimony is given to Lord Saville and the questioning is monitored by Christopher Clark who was Counsel to the Inquiry – all other elements of the original inquiry are also present on the stage. This setting in which the questioning takes place is intended to build the reliability of the images and testimonies, authenticate them through providing the original conditions of the investigation, and to enhance the official character of the highly personal and emotional evidence. There are also other techniques which construct the credibility of the information presented in the testimonies. Yet, the Tricycle's production was welcomed with mixed sentiments. Some reviewers appreciated the informative value of the performance which presented the reconstruction of the events and the compelling evidence incriminating the British Army and its officers. Facts revealed in personal stories were seen as reliable and accurately rendered. As Michael Billington observed, commenting on how the play presented the attitude of Westminster towards what happened on the fatal day, "pretence and prevarication are gradually stripped away". Primarily, he saw in Taylor's play a vital source of knowledge, "you emerge from the event, after 2 hours, not only better informed, but feeling that, at its best, theatre is a vital part of a democratic society" (Billington 2005). Other critics however, concentrated on the selective and manipulative construction of the text which, for instance in the opinion of Douglas Murray, was playing for cheap laughs from the audience. Moreover, Murray points out facts omitted by the staged inquiry, among others the 668 British soldiers killed during the Troubles who never receive a mention unlike the Irish victims. The critic concludes with a general comment that "'Tribunal theatre' is simply filling a gap in the market for no-strings-attached, neatly packaged, moral tourism" (Murray 2005). A similarly sceptical view is expressed by David Barnett writing for the *Irish theatre magazine* who develops a more theoretical argument by saying that "verbatim theatre (...) is driven by a need to locate tendentious themes within authentic material that resists the claim that the dramatist has distorted facts through fiction" (Burnett 2005: 17).

Two sides of the divide represent contradictory views on verbatim theatre

and, on a more theoretical level, two concepts of literary realism. Those who appreciate the informative value of documentary writing are more ready to see through the literary, poetic and indeed rhetorical devices employed to compile the text of the performance. Those who see verbatim pieces as unreliable, do not approve of the complex techniques of establishing credibility and refuse to treat them as transparent and neutral. These two perspectives also inflame the debates about realism in such fields as historiography and journalism. To what extent a historical account and a journalistic report can carry, preserve and communicate the truth about past or present events? In my view, what is particularly interesting about *Bloody Sunday* by Norton-Taylor is the fact that it combines elements of a historical account with stylistic components typical of contemporary journalism. In other words, the analysis of the play indicates that the intention behind its creation was twofold: to build a story about historical events using methods reserved for journalism. The confused responses of the reviewers reflect the mixed assumptions of the author and director of the play.

2. *Bloody Sunday* and the structure of truth

Bloody Sunday is written within the format of hard news reporting. It fulfils basic standards of professional journalism in rendering facts and narrating events. Through an elaborate system of information and cross-verification the reader is persuaded to believe that the play never presents composite scenes, invented characters or quotes. There are twelve witnesses who are introduced by name, function and characterised by their relation to the fatal events. Consequently, all opinions presented have the value of what journalists call “primary sources” and automatically gain the badge of authenticity. All the facts which are described by the witnesses are confronted with official records of the investigation which followed the massacre. Moreover, if a given account grows chaotic and incoherent due to memory lapses or emotions of the speaker, the official leading the inquiry takes it upon himself to reconstruct the true chronology. It is therefore explicitly stressed that Norton-Taylor’s primary objective was to avoid “misstating chronology” and any falsification of the original drift of events (Aucoin 2001: 7).³ These are two basic premises of professional journalism.

Truth is therefore treated as an object which is waiting to be discovered and described. When the play begins, Christopher Clarke, who is conducting the inquiry, states that “the truth has a light of its own” (Norton-Taylor 2005: 7). Stylistically and technically *Bloody Sunday* is written with the assumption that

³ These are basic characteristics which are used to differentiate between standard journalism and its more artistic version, that is literary journalism of such writers as for instance Ryszard Kapuściński. See also: Keeble 2004, especially chapters 6 and 7.

reality can be approached and approximated through the narrative medium and that the narratives offered in the form of witnesses’ accounts are transparent in rendering experiential content of one’s memories. A variety of narratives are used to reinforce one another, the factual basis of the inquiry is accumulative, linear and rational as all the stories are supposed to contribute to the final effect of omniscience. For instance, when Father Daly, a local priest, is interviewed, the emphasis is neatly placed on the firmness of his views and convictions, and the reliability of information about the tragic events is spectacularly shifted into the foreground:

C Clarke: You say: ‘I saw a soldier stepping out from the gable end of block 1, going down to one knee, and taking aim and firing at him and the young man staggered, and then he started running crazily around for a few moments?’ You have a recollection of that, do you?

Daly: Absolute clear recollection of that. It is one of the, um, things I remember from that day particularly, yeah.

I remember the soldier stepping out from the end of the – the Eden Place end of the Rossville Flats – of that block, coming out and firing, and Michael Bridge was dancing around or shouting at the soldiers. I remember him being shot, I remember his body after he was shot, and then he just staggered out of my sight line but I knew that he had been hit

(Norton-Taylor 2005: 14).

By contrast, Brian Friel’s *The freedom of the city* (1973) narrates the Bloody Sunday tragedy from various, contradictory points of view – apart from the four protesters who hide in the Guildhall, we also get stories and accounts from a judge, a sociologist, television newsman, policeman as well as a balladeer. Unlike Norton-Taylor’s *Bloody Sunday*, Friel’s *Freedom of the city* “explores the contradictions in ‘truth’” (Andrews 1995: 123) which is always subjective and tainted by the conditions of a personal narrative. Friel is interested in the subtext and in how language is a form of power as well as political and social control (Andrews 1995: 124). Ultimately, the play shows the artificial, literary nature of reality and dramatises the impossibility of arriving at a coherent view of events (Andrews 1995: 124). It is hard to imagine a more extreme opposite to Norton-Taylor’s treatment of the truth and facts in his play, as Friel’s work consists of many voices which flatly contradict one another:

Sudden burst of rubber bullets, followed by screaming and the revving of armoured vehicles. SKINNER lies flat on his face until the burst is over. Then he suddenly grabs MICHAEL by the back of his jacket and drags him, face down and limp, up to the door and into the parlour. He drops him in the middle of the room, runs back to the door, locks it. As they enter, LILY uncovers her eyes momentarily.

Lily: I just thought he is a young fella. Is he hurt bad?
 Skinner: No.
 Lily (to Michael) Did you get a thump of a baton, young fella?
 Skinner: Gas.
 Lily: Maybe he got a rubber bullet in the stomach.
 Skinner: Only gas.
 Lily: He might be bleeding internal.
 Skinner: Gas! Are you deaf?
 Lily: I like to see the blood. As long as you can see the blood
 there's always hope.
 Skinner: He'll come round.
 (...)

Balladeer: A hundred Irish heroes one February day Took over Derry's Guildhall,
 beside old Derry's quay. They defied the British Army, they defied the RUC.
 They showed the crumbling empire what good Irishmen could be

(Friel 2001: 118).

Liam O'Kelly (A television newsman): I am standing on the walls overlook
 Guildhall Square in Derry where only a short time ago a civil rights meeting, es-
 timated at about three thousand strong, was broken up by a large contingent of po-
 lice and troops. There are no reports of serious casualties but unconfirmed reports
 are coming in that a group of about fifty armed gunmen have taken possession of
 the Guildhall here below me and have barricaded themselves in

(Friel 2001: 117).

Contrasting the official version of events with personal narratives of the victims and the poet's mythologized ballad, Friel's drama rejects any standards of objectivity which shape verbatim accounts of Norton-Taylor's play. In comparison to Friel's *Freedom of the city*, *Bloody Sunday* offers a straight, reliable and objectified account of the tragedy. Its careful journalistic rendering of events lures the reader to believe that the account is not distorted or biased. For that reason some reviewers praised the informative value of the play.

3. Documentary drama – between a chronicle and a story

However, Norton-Taylor's text carries hidden and subtle stylistic devices which turn it into a heavily edited and selective report. *Bloody Sunday* is a play about history and as such it runs into various traps of historical writing. The theme of the play, that is, the tragedy which happened in 1972, belongs to the past and constitutes what White terms the "historical field". All the incidents and facts which form the field of a historian's investigation are subject to "cognitive operations", that is, they develop some argument, as well as they reflect a particular "aesthetic perception" which in White's opinion means a particular kind of emplotment or story (White 1975: 27, 6-7). In White's theory of historical writing, comedy, tragedy, romance and satire are four archetypal story forms which

impose a plot on a given historical field. Of course, historians who conduct research and compose texts consider their storytelling as a transparent and objective method of realistic writing. Yet, in the view of White's philosophy of history they always represent a stylistic type of narrative with a clear epistemological bias (White 1975: 6-7).

If we agree that the surface form of *Bloody Sunday* is meant to present an objective sequence of events, we may conclude that it refers to White's description of a chronicle. Chronicles were nothing more but a simple string of dates and facts, without literary motifs nor imposed endings. On the deeper level however, the play is a story, that is, the "arrangement of the events into the components of a spectacle" (White 1975: 5). It employs narrative devices, tropes and archetypal plot structures which design its ideological message. In other words, verbatim drama occupies the space between the objectivity of a chronicle and the constructedness of a historicized story.

The question which needs to be addressed is: how *Bloody Sunday* employs various literary motifs to serve as strategies of rational explanation; how do these strategies cope with the vast and chaotic material? Most importantly, the documentary accounts concentrate on a selected group of marchers whose last moments before death are described by more than one witness. The same recurring, cyclical movement is systematically applied to events and particular recognisable spaces. As such, although people who are described in the narratives are real individuals killed in the riot, they inevitably turn into literary characters or heroes of stories repeated over and over again by different observers in varying narrative configurations. Another strategy which influences the reader's approach to the authenticity and objectivity of the play is the regular recurrence of particular motifs, places and people, which is done with the evident intention to emplot these elements in the mode of tragedy. Not only does it lend the poetic and rhetorical coherence to the story, but often leaves the reader with the impression that instead of an objective selection of material he or she deals with a controlled analysis.

Moreover, for obvious reasons, only selected moments of the day are particularly concentrated on. However, a number of chosen witnesses mention the same incidents, and their accounts univocally converge on the motif of death. Death lies in the very centre of all of the narratives and other strands of the stories are pushed to the side and remain in the shadow. Metonymically death is elevated to represent Bloody Sunday as such. It is a powerful and all-inclusive metaphor of the events of that day. The dominating metaphor of death – death which in reality was only part of the complex chain of facts, incidents and decisions – engulfs everything under its rubric in the way in which Hayden White described the function of the basic tropes of historical analysis providing recognisable qualities to a mysterious stretch of history.

By implication every step of the British Army, even not intended to do so, is automatically seen as leading directly towards death. The British commander not having a detailed plan of action is implicitly accused of killing innocent civilians. These associations are made by using the basic tropes of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche.

One fragment of the recorded evidence provides the following description of a protester's death:

C Clark: Could we then go back to paragraphs 24 to 26. You describe the circumstances in which Barney McGuigan came to be shot. You describe how he walked away from the group at the gable end [of block 1] and you say that all the time that he was walking you could see the left-hand side of his face and you were calling to him all the time to come back and he kept 'looking back towards us'. You say that you could see bullets going past you and Mr McGuigan from all directions. Did those bullets land anywhere before Mr McGuigan was hit or were you just conscious of them going past you?

McBride: I was just conscious of them going past.

C Clarke: You describe hearing two distant shots, after the first of which Mr McGuigan turned back towards you. You think he turned his whole body and the second shot hit him and blew his head up. You are quite sure, are you, that it was the second and not the first shot?

McBride: It was the second shot.

C Clarke: Those are my questions

(Norton-Taylor 2005: 48-49).

Death, then, is presented as the ultimate destiny of the man. His behaviour and movements lead him directly to it. However, this powerful metaphor excludes any possibility of different interpretations by endowing the incident with sombre, tragic tone. It distracts attention from such questions as, who is the man, where was the man going, why wasn't he hiding, in other words, by its ideological bias the ruling metaphor overshadows issues which might direct the reader's own, private investigation into areas incriminating for the protesters. It is important to see in this description the basic mechanism in which, as Hayden White might say, a given trope, in this respect the metaphor of death, provides "a characterisation of the world of experience" and is in fact "an effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language" (White 1975: 37).

Irony is another trope used in *Bloody Sunday* selectively and self-consciously. It never appears in the speeches of innocent witnesses. It is always present in the reports of the Army officers or soldiers. As White observes, irony is essentially dialectical in its operation and is used for self-negation (White 1975: 37). There is a clear dialectic relation between accounts given by the civilian witnesses and explanations presented by the military staff. This level of meta-narrative comment in which irony provides the basic template for com-

prehension is a form of investigative operation which blurs the pre-supposed objectivity and realism of the play.

To sum up, *Bloody Sunday* by Richard Norton-Taylor skilfully combines the standards of contemporary journalism with some narrative techniques of modern historiography. In an objective form of a report it implements a particular epistemological position which determines very particular criteria for realism. The narrative operations present in the play, such as the above-mentioned selection of characters, events, places, motifs, as well as cognitive operations based on metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony carry ideological implications. One is not supposed to doubt that a British soldier is a murderer. And this conviction is not argued exclusively on the basis of facts or an open debate, it is attributed to this particular literary character as part of his narrative function. With only a slight exaggeration one can say that a British soldier in Ireland is the wolf from the story of the *Little Red Riding Hood*. He is bound for evil because all he is supposed to do is to follow the pattern of the folk tale character.

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