

## The Character in Journalism: Reconciling Narratology and Ethics

Mário Mesquita

Translated by Alexander A. Lee

Edited by Anna M. Klobucka

**Abstract.** The concept of character, traditionally discussed with reference to the literary analysis of fictional texts, may also serve as a useful analytic tool in the context of nonfictional writing, such as the narratives of history or journalism. The relevance of introducing the notion of character into critical analyses of journalistic texts is intensified in the present by the growing personalization both of political and social life and of media discourses. This article relies on contributions from the field of literary theory and media studies to map out the conditions and the implications of the construction of characters in journalistic practice.

Journalists project their own subjectivity whenever they interview figures from the worlds of politics, literature, or show business. This is what Doris Lessing affirms, in an article published in the *British Review of Journalism*, in relation to her own experience as an interviewee: "One will want to know about your political experience, the next about 'mysticism,' a third about early life in Africa, another about your love life, assumed to be the same as whichever one of your heroines she is identifying with or, if a man, finds attractive. This 'portrait' will be printed as a total picture" (Lessing 19).

Lessing goes on:

People with passionate beliefs make the worst interviewers. In the early days of the women's movement (the late sixties and seventies) I was quoted saying things I could never have said: it was inconceivable to these women that I, a feminist, did not believe exactly what they believed. In Spain, after Franco died, socialists announced that I had never visited Spain under Franco. Untrue, but they needed to say it. In Spain, in Italy and in Brazil interviews have been headed: *She Believes a Woman's Place is in the Kitchen*. Perhaps because I like cooking? When such interviews appear on the same day with those saying the opposite, no wonder readers acquire protective cynicism. "Did you actually say so and so?" I am often asked, and the reply is nearly always, "No, I did not." (19)

Some of the examples Lessing gives refer to the "entertainment industry":

I don't believe much written about singers, actors, actresses, film stars. Does anyone? I think our feeling is something like: If these people choose to deal in illusion then they must submit to being figures in our mythic landscapes. When they are dead they are often stripped of their magic, often to the degree they were endowed with it. Rudolph Valentino, for instance. Take Lord Olivier—yes, he was charming, kind, witty, clever—all that. But the bland and solemn pieces written after he died made it seem as if he never had been anything but a favourite son, effortlessly successful, easily given honours and high positions. (22)

In the writer's view, if schoolchildren learning about journalism were to consult a newspaper archive going back several decades, they would discover how Laurence Olivier was portrayed "before he was beatified" (22). Lessing stresses that through this research they "would learn about the mutability of public opinion—created, after all, by the media—the operations of envy and, above all, that to be as good at anything as Olivier was needs not only to be God-gifted, but a great deal of hard work, often against opposition" (22).

Lessing's statements show how character creation is a structurally central activity in journalistic practice and discourse. The writer refers in particular to the interview process and the journalist's active role as interviewer. However, the processes of character creation pervade all traditional forms of journalism, from accounts of current events and reporting to column writing, as well as editorials and "soundings" of the notoriety and prestige of public figures (such as the "who's up, who's down" columns that proliferate in the weekly Portuguese press). The genre traditionally referred to as a "profile" or "portrait"

deserves special attention, since it consists of a sort of micro-biography. Lessing further suggests that the journalistic character can be considered from a diachronic perspective, by examining how it has changed or not over time, as well as synchronically, by comparing the configuration of the same person in different media, such as newspapers, radio, television, or Web sites.

If in Lessing's article the word "character" never appears, Salman Rushdie assumes the transposition of the concept from fiction to journalistic narrative head-on, stating that newspapers are giving more and more space to nonfictional "characters" whose creation has become, as the writer argues, an essential part of journalism. These images are never regarded frontally but from a slanted perspective, as furtively captured profiles. However, as Rushdie stresses, it is very difficult for the real person behind the image to modify by his or her own words and acts the effect created by these biographical sketches drawn by journalists, which the archives preserve and reproduce forever (Lits, "Personne" 42).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the journalistic character often appears reduced to a few salient features that with their performative effectiveness compensate for what they take away from interpretative depth. As Eduardo Prado Coelho insightfully observed: "journalists like to offer simplified images of people. This is one of the rules of fiction writing: characters gain depth and contrast insofar as they possess distinctive traits that help to define them" (48).

### From fiction to journalism

The character is a traditional category in literary analysis insofar as it often constitutes "the axis around which the action revolves and which serves to organize the economy of the narrative" (Reis and Lopes 314). The psychological complexity of characters has been regarded as a decisive element in the appreciation of literary works. It is within this framework that E. M. Forster sets forth his typology of characters in *Aspects of the Novel*. With reference to their composition, he establishes a distinction between *flat characters* and *round characters*. Flat characters "are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (73). The round character, on the other hand, distinguishes itself by the complexity of its definition and by its inconclusive nature (that is, by the unpredictability of the character's behavior): "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round" (81).

Philippe Hamon has introduced somewhat greater rigor into the study of this topic. For him, the complex or elementary nature of the character cannot be solely determined through empirical observation or psychological estimation. Rather, it is evaluated in terms of "semantic axes" (social origin, wealth, beauty, etc.) or the "mode of determination," according to criteria both quantitative (the frequency with which particular information about the character is given in the text) and qualitative, such as whether the information is conveyed by the character itself, by other characters, or by the narrator, or whether it is deduced from the character's actions (Hamon 134).<sup>2</sup>

The relevance of the character as a category of analysis is not limited to the field of literature; it has been generally accepted that the concept operates not only in literary narrative per se but also in film, comics, and radio and television series (Reis and Lopes 314). It is more daring, however, to insist that analytic approaches drawn from literary theory or semiotics might also apply to nonfiction, with reference to such entities as the concept of "journalistic character." Relating this concept to the distinction established by Foster, we would generally find that the journalistic character tends toward being identified as a flat character, given its reduction to a few basic features, as happens, for example, with the characterization of politicians as "hawks" and "doves" or as "moderates" and "hardliners." In Portuguese politics, the choices faced by voters in legislative or presidential elections have been simplified through the pairing of opposites: Mário Soares vs. Sá Carneiro, Soares vs. Ramalho Eanes, Soares vs. Cavaco Silva, António Guterres vs. Cavaco, Jorge Sampaio vs. Cavaco. In such cases, the sketched profile is reduced to a handful of qualities deemed as essential and expected to be recognized by the receiver of the information. Journalistic characters share the basic features of characters in paraliterary texts, such as popular novels or adventure stories, in which complexity gives way to "narrative effectiveness" little concerned with "psychological subtleties" (Couégenas 154). They generally dovetail with "rudimentary mimesis," which facilitates the "effects of identification" (Couégenas 153) to the extent that it reduces the complexity of the persons portrayed. Instead of assembling facts, descriptions, and actions aimed at adding complexity and enriching the configured profile, the narrator almost always seeks to "repeatedly *exemplify, illustrate, and confirm* the features of the identification sheet (*fiche signalétique*) on which the initial description was based" (Couégenas 156; original emphasis). In more literary forms of journalism, there are of course cases in which the narrator allows himself or herself the freedom to



construct round characters, namely when—in outlets exceptionally receptive to such forms, e.g., Sunday newspaper magazines—contributors who are also literary authors or journalists with a literary bent decide to demonstrate the complexity of a particular public figure (for example, Bill Clinton as portrayed by Gabriel García Márquez; García Márquez 16–18).

Given that the journalistic character is not created exclusively within the text but also absorbs the meaning attributed to it by the reader (or viewer), distinct forms of identification set forth by Hans Robert Jauss with reference to what he labels the “communicative function” of aesthetic experience can be equally relevant in the realm of media. According to Jauss, as a proponent of an “aesthetic of reception,” art can exert “communicative effects” on society, “in the strict sense of effects that create standards” (Jauss 150). One should keep this point in mind when looking at his synopsis of models of “communicational activity” and identification in aesthetic experience. His analysis is part of a reflection on the aesthetic that seeks to “struggle against the omnipotent cultural industry and the growing influence of mass media” (Jauss 156). At the same time, as Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter have observed, Jauss’s models of identification “situate the figure of the hero as a determining element in aesthetic experience” (112), making it possible to draw a connection between the “aesthetic experience” and the domain of media communication, in which journalistic characters and heroic figures are of decisive importance. Jauss himself acknowledges that his proposed models of identification in the field of aesthetic experience contain a degree of ambivalence, translating into “progressive or regressive norms of behavior” (153).<sup>3</sup> Journalistic characters often resemble those glorified figures described by Edgar Morin as “Olympians” in his well-known study of the culture industry of the 1960s: artists, aristocrats, politicians, or sports celebrities who, “owing to their dual nature, divine and human, circulate permanently between the worlds of projection and identification” (121–23). To relate Jauss’s typology to character reception in journalism, besides the less common modes of “identification through sympathy” (directed at the “imperfect hero,” whose weaknesses arouse compassion) and “ironic identification” (which occurs when the “hero” is vanquished or substituted by an “anti-hero”), the forms of identification that can be pointed to as central in public media space include “admiration” (of the perfect “hero”), “catharsis” (identification with a hero who suffers or confronts difficulty), and “association” (in which the subject assumes a role in a drama or competition, as if in a sacred rite).

### The character as literary category

Typologies of the novel reflect the importance given to the character as an analytical category in literary theory, as is the case with Wolfgang Kayser, who identifies “three substances” in the construction of the fictional universe: characters, events, and space. Accordingly, he distinguishes three main novelistic genres: the action novel, in which the characters exist as a function of an event (401); the character novel, which differs from the action novel “by having a single main character, while in the other there are usually two” (402); and the space novel, in which the structure of the narrative is based on a specific location, to the extent that all characters and events have “local value” (398).

Some authors linked to the *nouveau roman* movement, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, challenged the supremacy of the character, viewing it as a projection of the author to which they attributed an ideological motivation: “the character novel really belongs in the past and really characterizes a particular era: the time marked by the supremacy of the individual” (qtd. in Reis and Lopes 315). The currents of Russian Formalism and of textual semiology relativized the role played by the concept of the character, considering it ideological and psychologizing and choosing to resort instead to concepts such as “function” (Propp), “actant” (Greimas), or “thematic role” (Brémond). Regardless of their respective operational function in the syntactic analysis of narrative, these categories are not synonymous with that of character. “Actant,” for example, is defined as “a built (not given) unit of narrative grammar,” a definition that assumes no immediate correspondence between “actants” and “characters.” Various forms of the relationship between actants and actors or characters are expressed as “isomorphisms” (one actant equals one character), “demultiplications” (one actant equals several characters), or “syncretisms” (one character equals several actants).

In the dictionary of semiotics they co-authored, A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés predict the eclipse of the character as an operative category in literary analysis, to be “progressively replaced by the two concepts—more rigorously defined in semiotics—of actant and actor” (274). The character, labeled as an ideological notion, was relegated to the archaeology of literary analysis. The risk of confusion with a real-life person became one of the main points of criticism, leading to a call for categories that would preclude the anthropomorphic bias inherent in the concept of character. Jean-Marie Schaeffer counters these objections, stating that “to limit the relevance of the notion of character to the realm of fiction leads one to ignore that the construction of

factual reality and of fictional worlds often follows parallel paths, whether at the level of textual creation or textual comprehension" (623).

The eclipse of the character, whether it actually took place or not, was fleeting. As Vítor Manuel Aguiar e Silva stresses, the replacement of the character with the concept of "actant" would lead to a "severe reduction of the psychological, sociological, ethical and religious complexity of characters in literary narratives, particularly in the novel, and eliminate, by virtue of the concept's intrinsic timelessness, that which Paul Ricoeur refers to as 'the irreducible temporality of narrative'" (692). Moreover, Aguiar e Silva notes,

It is true that the concept of character implies a number of psychological, moral, and sociocultural attributes that predate narrative action, but this is not a valid argument against its use in literary theory or literary criticism. In empirical reality and in the "natural narratives" that spring from it, just as in literary fiction, action does not produce agents *ex novo*, although it can modify them profoundly. Thus, it is possible to state that action can be characterized, in part, as a function of those preexisting properties of the agents. (694)

The concept of character continued to be used in literature and in narratology while the dominance of Structuralism waned, which does not impede us from acknowledging the contributions of semiology in particular to the understanding of the character's syntactic functioning. Carlos Reis and Ana Cristina Lopes acknowledge that "functionalist ideas [...] at least had the merit of counteracting psychological and content-based excesses that had previously affected character analysis" (314).

### Narrative in the media

Starting from the embryonic phase of journalism in the seventeenth century, factual narratives and fictional narratives have cohabited the printed page.

<sup>4</sup> Fantastic reports about life on the moon and serialized novels have shared space with news items about the comings and goings of ships, rail schedules, court trials, or government measures. The boundaries are often blurred: journalistic fiction, fictionalized journalism, and "factual" journalism exist side by side and often overlap.

Narrativity is a dominant feature of the journalistic text. Gaye Tuchman affirms that dealing with facts as a journalist and spinning tales as a storyteller are not contradictory activities and stresses the likelihood that certain events

never become news because they cannot be inscribed into the existing repertory of storytelling frames (258–61). Journalistic narrative belongs to the broader category of “factual narrative,” which includes, among others, discursive forms such as history, biography, and the diary. The circular relationship between fictional narrative and factual narrative encompasses the notion of character, which is not exclusive to the written word or to the world of literature and can be viewed as one of the categories common to the different genres of journalistic narrative, being equally relevant to the analysis of print media and visual media. As Schaeffer states,

The character is a fictitious representation of a person and the projective activity that makes us treat him or her as a person is essential to the creation and reception of narratives. Fictional text imitates factual text; and in the latter, after all, the names (and therefore the characters, with their attributes and actions) refer to people (and to their attributes and actions). (623)

Marc Lits, who has pioneered the application of the concept of character to journalistic analysis, uses the notion of “media character.” The present text will consider what can be defined as a subcategory of “journalistic character,” since the qualifier “media” can include, for example, serialized novels, soap operas, or other fictional domains. In fact, the character in soap opera has already been the object of analyses in which the legacy of literary theory is brought to reflect on the pragmatism of television production. For example, Reis considers the specificity of the soap opera character’s “progressive construction” determined “by direct articulation with the public’s reaction,” which explains how “a character may be brought to the forefront and even, to an extent, slowly and carefully modified with each broadcast, while another may disappear or become less important” (35).

Similar to what occurs in literary studies, “media narratology” is concerned with the creation of characters. What makes journalistic character interesting for both literary and print-media analysis is related to its triple function, as described by Yves Reuter: as the *typological sign* that allows for identifying not only the narrative as such but also its various types or subgenres; as the *textual organizer*, insofar as the character serves to connect distinct episodes of narrated action; and, last but not least, as the *space of investment* for both the author and the reader on the psychic, ideological, and axiological levels (16). Reuter considers the character as an ideologically charged construct, a



privileged space for the “investment of values and visions of the world” (36). Characters are the “cornerstone of axiologization,” that is, of the “distribution of values” in the narrative (Reuter 36), particularly when the subcategory of “hero” is in play, “the vanishing point where the reader’s glance is polarized as he or she becomes aware of the system of characters, their respective values, and the hierarchy derived therefrom” (Glaudes and Reuter 31). Given its pivotal axiological role in the narrative, the character is therefore “a place of risk,” in Glaudes and Reuter’s words, as demonstrated by

marginal warnings for the reader to treat eventual similarities between characters and real people as purely gratuitous coincidence; literary trials like the one Flaubert was put on because of *Madame Bovary*, in which the charges and allegations referred incessantly to the conduct of the novel’s characters; prescriptions of political or religious authorities that attempt to impose or outlaw certain types of characters, as was the case for a long time with reference to children’s literature or within certain aesthetics such as socialist realism. (64)

According to Schaeffer, “Normative systems are revealed [in narratives] through the evaluation of characters,” but it sometimes happens in novels that these “normative systems,” obeyed by the characters, “are not sanctioned by the text” (625). Such discrepancies may occur, for instance, “through multiple instances of divergent or incompatible evaluation, none of which are privileged; multivoiced narration, found in many modern novels, is one of the means that allow this confusion to occur” (Schaeffer 625–26). Ideological investment is no less palpable in “factual narrative,” regardless of the fact that the issue here is not denouncing the coincidences between the character and the “real person” as fortuitous, but rather, on the contrary, demonstrating that the character coincides in its main features with the person it portrays. The multiplicity of voices and values in journalistic narrative also guarantees a plurality of evaluations and normative systems, although at given times certain characters tend to generate around them a general consensus that corresponds to the exercise of charismatic leadership or to situations of collective idol worship.

### Reader’s representations

One of the contributions of semiological analysis is the emphasis on reception and the recognition that the character is not only construed by the text but also reconstructed by the reader (Hamon 118–19). Thus, a single character can become

split into multiple entities in the process of reception. In a dictionary, Napoleon Bonaparte is a "sign character"; in a history textbook or a newspaper article he is apprehended as a "character in a non-literary enunciation," while in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* he figures as a "character in a literary enunciation" (Hamon 121).

In fiction, the writer has complete domain over his or her created characters, while a historian or a journalist refers to someone who exists in the "real world." The journalistic character showcases, besides its creative elaboration, the journalist's work of observation, documentation, inquiry, and interpretation, with the purpose of assembling all elements relative to the "objective referent" under scrutiny. The ontological existence of the "real person" can never be reduced to the stories in which he or she figures, while the fictional character is circumscribed by what the author tells us about him or her (Schaeffer 623). Literary theorists stress that the character is not a person, although "the reader—whether naive or savvy—is not in any way fooled by literary convention. In the reader's eyes, the character 'exists' within the framework of a narrative that makes its representation plausible and enables the reader to make psychological considerations and value judgments about the character" (Grojnowski 104). While in journalism we know that the character "represents" a person who "really" exists, it so happens that in the generality of cases *the only thing we know of that person is the character* that the media reflects back to us. Usually, ordinary people only have access to the "stars" of politics or show business through the bits and pieces of their biography that are transmitted by journalism. As Lits states,

If it is hardly debatable that the Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin exist and have real lives, it is also necessary to admit that nearly all television viewers and newspaper readers only learn about these two very media-prominent characters from the "press narratives" that present them to the public eye. We do not know them and will never know about them except for what the media report. And the media construe these characters according to the criteria of verisimilitude, sometimes as suggested by the public-relations staff of the politician in question. (*Récit, médias et société* 57)

The personalization of political and social life and that of media discourse go hand in hand. This tendency in journalism is made evident by the increasingly frequent invasion of privacy, sometimes exacerbated by resorting to new electronic and computer technologies with a view to obtaining "material" suitable to feed the character-making machine.

I have claimed so far in this essay that literary theory is the cornerstone of journalistic character analysis. However, it does not exhaust the issue, which mobilizes different fields of knowledge and elicits contributions from various methods and disciplines, from narratology to ethics.

### The connection with reality

René Wellek's discussion of the appearance of historical characters in literary and fictional texts refers to certain events of questionable veracity that are described in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. With malicious intent, the Russian novelist transferred the description of Napoleon's sumptuous toilette, found in an account of his exile in St. Helena, to the morning of the Battle of Borodino. The critic reminds us as well of the account of an eyewitness that denies that the czar, contrary to what occurs in the novel, might have eaten or distributed cookies to the crowds in Moscow.

As Wellek concludes,

All this gives rise to scholarly detective work or possibly may yield insights into the creative process, but *I shall be content to say that the question of accuracy does not matter in fiction*, that Napoleon and the Tsar are as fictional figures as Natasha Rostov or Pierre Bezukhov who, in their turn, may draw features from actual people: Tolstoy's own sister-in-law and his own life experiences. (24; emphasis added)

From the point of view of literary theory and criticism, Wellek considers it irrelevant to verify the exact truth of historical characters, places, and structures within a fictional context: "We need not know whether the Tsar actually munched cookies in 1805 on his balcony or whether Napoleon had his back rubbed with *eau de cologne* on the morning of the battle of Borodino. [...] Nor does the professed intention of the author matter" (25). In certain cases, the author's wish to try "to hurt, to ridicule and humiliate living human beings" may not be in doubt, "but the accuracy of the allegations or their effect on the victims and their contemporaries are questions completely extraneous to any critical concern" (25).

If for the novelist the connection between the real person and the character is indifferent or irrelevant, for the journalist that link is fundamental. The journalistic character "represents," in an ideal manner, an identified living human being with a "real" existence. The same issue arises with reference to historical characters. As Françoise Peyregne observes, "A superficial analysis

of the 'historical character' might apportion its meaning as follows: the noun 'character' designates the ensemble of elements of artistic or literary representation, while the qualifier 'historical' points to an objective referent" (15). Analyzing the construction of characters would then consist in "measuring the greater or lesser distance apparently existing between the historical referent and its artistic elaboration"; this, however, leads to an "overly schematic" interpretation, for who can claim to know "the historical referent in its pure state?" (Peyregne 15). The historical referent is accessible only through prior elaborations, among which we find journalistic representations.

Following Hamon, Jacqueline Covo affirms that the historical character contains "a piece of information that, emerging from reality, predates the creative process and that, even if it then gains distance from the historical truth, needs to be recognized by the public" (Covo 273). Covo also compares the historical character created by the press with the historical character in the novel. It would be relevant for her analysis to have considered a third term as well, the historical character in nonfictional enunciations, i.e., in the historian's own text, which belongs to the same ("factual") "family" as the character created by the journalist. In Covo's view, the journalist relies on data resulting from "information" (news agencies, reporting, interviews, etc.), but

the distanced view characteristic of the historical novel is absent; history, immediate and dynamic, is being made. History is, therefore, unfinished and uncertain in its development, and the character being presented is not completely bound by a set of stereotyped images—unlike what occurs in the historical character in the novel—because it still has a future. (273)

The journalist "should respect the data obtained from 'reality' more than a novelist, precisely because he or she is responsible for shaping the stereotypes under construction"; at the same time, however, the journalistic character is a creation of its author, to the extent that the latter possesses "freedom of choice among the elements drawn from 'reality' and in the process of their respective elaboration" (Covo 273). Like an ordinary person preparing a curriculum vitae and organizing data according to the desired outcome (getting a specific job, reaching or impressing a certain audience, etc.), the journalist also has a wide margin of freedom in shaping the "portrait" of a specific personality.

In another context, I analyzed the profiles that were included in a section of the Portuguese daily *Diário de Notícias* entitled "As caras da notícia" ("Faces in



the News") over the span of one month (November 1997).<sup>5</sup> These brief narratives (sixty lines, on the average) were each destined to introduce an interview with the person they referred to. In a total of thirteen individuals under scrutiny, there were five political figures, three judges, two sports figures, the president of a cultural institution, a university professor, and a fashion designer. Only two of them were women. My analysis showed that, in some cases, the information traditionally required for a curriculum vitae, such as work experience and education, was missing and its absence compensated for by abundant exercises in psychological reflection bolstered by random recourse to astrology. Two of these profiles did not mention their subjects' profession; three omitted their educational experience. Profession was mentioned nine times and political appointments eight times. In compensation, the authors cited certain elective affinities, alluding for example to the subjects' friendships with important political figures, with the purpose of enhancing their image through an effect of contagious association. While there were generally no references to the characters' physical features, the profiles often featured attempts at psychological characterization, with the aim of increasing the "human interest" of the text.

The most notorious example of such a "psychological portrait" was the description of a soccer coach that resorted to war-related metaphors ("a pure warrior") along with allusions to the subject's holiness ("well-versed in the vagaries of Portuguese soccer, he managed to keep his soul unblemished by sin"). One of the judges was characterized by his "optimism," another one as "a very cordial person who relies on affective engagement when facing his critics." The designer was distinguished as "daring and nonconformist," one of the politicians for being "a discreet man," and another for his precociousness ("he did everything while still young"). Hobbies were another detail that rounded out these psychological portraits, with the descriptions of their subjects as an "unconditional lover of classical music" or a "collector of antique cars" lending them additional credibility. The texts oscillated between lofty praise and noncommittal balancing acts: one subject was described as "knowing how to read between the lines," though "not always [. . .] rectilinear in form," while another was said to be unable to "speak forcefully to the masses," but "could give a lesson to those who transform politics into a way of life." The work schedules of these personalities, according to their own testimony, were almost always demanding: one said he worked "an average of ten hours a day," while another declared: "I start at 9 a.m. and never finish pushing paper before midnight" (Mesquita 84–90).

Factual information about the individuals profiled was interspersed with stories that circulated about them in the workplace, among friends, or in the world of journalism. The "Faces in the News" features certainly combined elements of the subjects' own "image strategies" (beginning with their elaboration of the factual information presented) with those derived from journalistic documentation and inquiry, and distinguishing between these two categories of information would entail another type of investigation. The chosen subjects were portrayed positively, with emphasis on such values as hard work, determination, and competence. Their profiles present the readers with role models that compensate the society for the damages caused by political or sports scandals, by the "crisis of representation," and by investigative journalism.

### **The journalist's responsibility**

In addition to the journalist's creativity, the journalistic character reflects his or her work of documentation, observation, inquiry, and interpretation undertaken with the aim to gather the elements related to the "objective referent" in question. The frameworks the journalists fill with the data resulting from their research may be a legacy of mythic and literary archetypes, but the new investigative opportunities stemming from current information technologies and computerized research tools represent an impetus to the building of characters.

The personalization of political and social life and the proliferation of journalistic characters are two faces of the same coin. Changes in the external structure of news and reporting are not merely a reflection of the transformations in the practice of political institutions, as Michael Schudson shows in his analysis of the State of the Union addresses over two hundred years:

After the turn of the [twentieth] century, reporters increasingly began with a "lead" that summarized high points of the event being reported. Reports of the president's annual message to Congress, for instance, were at mid-century strictly chronological accounts of congressional proceedings that noted the reading of the president's message in its place but made no mention of what the message said (the devoted reader could turn to a back page to read the entire speech verbatim). After 1900 the reporters invariably began with a sentence or two that identified the highlights of what the president's message was about. (*Good Citizen* 180)<sup>6</sup>

Changes in the political system and in the narrative conventions of journalism—like the introduction of the "lead"—interact and influence each

other reciprocally, as happens in the case of the focusing of the narrative on the president's message, which goes hand in hand with the increasing importance attributed to the presidency in American politics. The narrative form does not simply mirror the transformations of politics but also affects the behavior of politicians and political parties. Schudson exemplifies this interaction by evoking President Wilson's decision to appear before the Congress:

Some of the most significant changes, changes that could be assumed to be causes of new modes of reporting, *followed* the change in news conventions. Woodrow Wilson, for example, revived the precedent, abandoned by Jefferson, of appearing before Congress to deliver the State of the Union address and other messages. [...] Wilson's action reinforced the centrality of the President and the habit of seeing the President as "a person," but the habit was already being encouraged by journalistic practice. (*Power* 64; original emphasis)

The journalistic character is an element that structures not only media narrative but also the political system itself. Notwithstanding rationalist utopias of a public space organized exclusively according to thematic and policy options, democratic systems have always encompassed electoral choice and charismatic appeal based on the perceived "character" of political officeholders or candidates. Many critics believe that public debate in today's democracies has been debased by excessive personalization, marginalizing major issues and making popular choice dependent solely on the stereotypes promoted by the media. Bracketing this larger question away, let us only stress that even in the early stages of democracy—for some synonymous with its golden age—electoral choice was always focused, at least in part, on the candidate's person. Some historians and sociologists sustain that at the end of the eighteenth century American elites demanded that voters choose the politicians by examining their moral character. This criterion was held to be more important in the choice of the people's representatives than policy principles or political and economic interests. What was then considered ideal would come under criticism today, especially from those who defend a strong concept of citizenship based on participation in public life and policy debates.

The mechanisms whereby public figures have been publicized by the media from the era of liberal revolutions to the present, though variable in accordance with social contexts and political regimes, have undergone a radical transformation by becoming subjected to the mandates of commerce and

spectacle. In politics, existence is synonymous with visibility and appearance. For this very reason, the written, iconic, and auditory dimensions of journalistic character creation are essential to the shaping of the spheres of politics, show business, art, or literature. If factual precision is irrelevant from the literary creator's point of view, and if it is possible to posit, in the realm of aesthetic production, a sort of *creative authorial irresponsibility*, the same cannot be said of the journalist whose activity is organized as a function of what we might call *referential duty*. To recognize that the journalistic character is created by a journalist is not tantamount to granting the journalist the right to free license.

The representation of persons by the media—with their multifaceted recourse to verbal, visual, and auditory idioms—is much too complex to conform to a theory of journalism as a “mirror of the world.” The politician or any other personality becomes a journalistic character through the creativity of the journalist who grants it form and authenticity. The character into which a public personality is transformed may be conceived as the outcome of relations (including antagonistic ones) between the subject and the people or entities in charge of promoting his or her image, as well as by journalists, photographers, cameramen, and other media agents, Internet bloggers, and, finally, newspapers readers, television viewers, Web site visitors, and other kinds of active producers and consumers of media content. It is within this space of negotiation that journalistic characters are created.

The “contemporary media system” is built around “figures as real as they are shaped by the narrative,” e.g., Bill Clinton, Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein, John Paul II, and many others, who are “portrayed according to the logic of verisimilitude based on archetypal structures that approximate character roles sustaining paraliterary fiction (more so than literature proper) and possibly mythology” (Lits, “Le récit médiatique” 57). The networks of media personalities are also a structurally relevant factor of contemporary societies and of their respective political systems. The economy of political and media systems demands the construction of characters, thereby naturally encouraging the invasion of the citizens' private sphere with the aim of obtaining materials that will validate these characters as coherent and credible. Technological means available to those wishing to penetrate the private lives of others have never been so widespread and so perfect. The growing personalization of journalism is reflected in this tendency toward the invasion of privacy, exacerbated by the use of new electronic and computer media, in order to feed the machine responsible for the making (and unmaking) of characters. The



principles of protecting the intimacy of private life remain in place, but the practical rules of the game have changed. The influence of the Internet, blogs, and social networks is weakening more and more the boundary between the sphere of public communication and private lives, not only of politicians and other public figures, but also of private citizens.

Some of the new technologies present in our daily life cause us to unintentionally leave behind trails of our passage through video cameras, voice mail, e-mail, credit card use, and e-commerce. A few examples follow, all from the United States. The most blatant case of an invasion of private correspondence during the 1990s happened in the context of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, when the e-mails exchanged between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp, in spite of having been deleted by both correspondents, were retrieved from the Internet servers. U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle was the object of a media investigation carried out with the help of a personal computer, which retrieved a complete listing of all purchases he made on a credit card—though the magazine published only a few excerpts in order to prove the authenticity of the report.<sup>6</sup> Another journalist obtained a list of videotapes rented by a judge and his family from a video club near their home.<sup>7</sup> The list, published in a Washington weekly, did not contain any revelations that might displease Judge Bork and his family, but it constituted nonetheless an invasion of their privacy, resulting ultimately in the passage of an act establishing more rigorous privacy protections.<sup>8</sup> A computer-assisted investigation revealed extensive data about the private life of a basketball star, from the estimated value of his home to the makes and models of his cars, along with the number of times he had been summoned for speeding violations over the span of four years and a detention stemming from a scuffle as a teenager.<sup>9</sup>

The journalistic “profile” or “portrait” involves a dimension of research and inquiry, enabled by new information technologies, but it is not a mere mechanical reproduction in which the journalistic text (written or visual) functions as a kind of reflection of “real life.” Rather, it is a construction that engages the subjectivity of the reporter, whose role is not limited to “describing” people who exist “out there,” in the “real world,” independently of the journalist’s work.

### **The journalist’s responsibility in the construction of characters**

To admit that the journalistic character is a construct that involves the real-life person, the journalist, and the reader does not remove responsibility from the journalist; on the contrary, it allows for the outlining of the precise nature of

this responsibility. A journalist's construction of a character operates a convergence of "curricular" data (birth certificate, university degree, etc.), witness accounts, stereotypes particular to a specific milieu, and the journalist's observation and interpretation of the actions, behaviors, and achievements of the individual in question. Criticizing the traditional doctrine of journalistic objectivity, Theodore Glasser affirms: "Since news exists 'out there'—apparently independent of the reporter—journalists can't be held responsible for it. And since they are not responsible for the news being there, how can we expect journalists to be accountable for the consequences of merely reporting it?" (183). We might say, *mutatis mutandis*, that the journalistic character calls for a sense of professional responsibility precisely because it is not merely a product of copying or reflection of the existing person, but involves the creativity of the journalist who gives it unity, internal coherence, and final form.

The journalist's responsibility stems from the power of the media, meaning the public's dependence on the media and the journalists when its members need to know "what society expects of them and what they should expect from society" (Elliott 37).<sup>10</sup> As they exercise the power inherent in divulging information, journalists should avoid "causing unnecessary damage" (Elliott 44). When constructing characters, journalists can channel information that is needed by the public, from the standpoint of its political or social utility (assisting in the choice of an electoral candidate, for example), but it is obvious that they also run the risk of causing damage, often difficult to repair, to the persons they portray. For this very reason, the conception of a character, while resulting from the journalist's research and creativity, does not grant him or her the right to exercise free license. On the contrary, the journalist is bound by a form of responsibility in which precision, independence, authenticity, subjectivity, and restraint all play a part.

*Precision* should be assured through the critical analysis of documents and verification of sources. *Independence* is exercised in relation to staffers who mold the profiles of the public figures they serve, since the journalist generally takes recourse to the discourses of others and not only to direct inquiry and observation. *Authenticity* in the articulation of narrative and in the recreation of lived experience is rooted in the recognition of the creative component in the construction of journalistic characters.<sup>11</sup> *Subjectivity* assumes that the character will be introduced as an interpretation and a construct and not as a referential illusion, destined to erase the consciousness of journalistic mediation. *Restraint* acknowledges that, as Freud wrote, "biographical truth

is inaccessible" (qtd. in Robert 34), consequently withholding any conclusive judgment and avoiding violations of privacy.

Given the proliferation of narratives and characters, these proposed guidelines of conduct emerge, much like the professional code of ethics in general, as fragile tools. The characters that make up political, economic, social, and cultural life—without forgetting the journalists themselves (particularly the "anchor" on televised news broadcasts)—will very likely continue, in many cases, to correspond to the category of "flat" characters, with little depth or breadth. The success of the makers of journalistic characters, in and out of the boundaries of media institutions, is determined by the performative effectiveness of their respective contributions. In simplifying life stories that are by their own nature complex, journalism serves, in the words of Serge Moscovici, to balance "the affective economy of society" as it enables the public to identify with its leaders, thus helping confer "the appearance of equality" on that "unequal exchange" (333).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marc Lits quotes Rushdie's comments from the following source: "Pas de nouvelles sans fiction," *Courrier International* 295 (27 June 1996): 42.

<sup>2</sup> Hamon explains that, in relation to the character of a fighter, one might consider whether this identification a) results from a single qualification, whether direct or indirect (for example, someone saying that the character is a combatant); b) results from a reiterated direct or indirect qualification; c) is deduced from the mention of a single virtual action (a projected fight); d) is deduced from the mention of a reiterated virtual action (various projected fights); e) can be deduced from the mention of a single functional action (participation in a fight); f) can be deduced from the mention of a reiterated functional act (participation in various fights) (134).

<sup>3</sup> Jauss's chart of models of identification contains detailed indications of the behavioral norms considered progressive or regressive in each of the modes he analyzes.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of "faction" coined by Gérard Genette to refer to nonfictional narrative is not free from problems or immune to criticism, as Genette himself indicates, recognizing that fiction "also consists in the linking of facts"; the neologism "faction" offers, however, a way to avoid "defaulting systematically to negative locutions (non-fiction, non-fictional) that reflect and perpetuate the supremacy of fictional literature, which is precisely what I intended to question" (Genette 66).

<sup>5</sup> I carried out this small study during the time I served as the ombudsman of the *Diário de Notícias*. The motivation for the study came from reading the mini-biography of a candidate running for his second term as a mayor, which, while engaging intensely in pseudo-psychological analysis, did not offer the reader basic data that would be mandatory in any curriculum vitae, such as work experience and educational history.

<sup>6</sup> The data pertaining to Dan Quayle were disseminated in 1989 by Jeffrey Rothfeder writing in *Business Week* (Husselbee 145).

<sup>7</sup> This case took place during Judge Robert H. Bork's U.S. Supreme Court nomination hearings in 1987. The journalist was Michael Dolan of the weekly *City Paper* (Husselbee 145).

<sup>8</sup> The Video Privacy Protection Act, approved in 1988 in response to Judge Bork's case, prohibits the disclosure of information regarding video rentals, except with the consent of the client or under legal order.

<sup>9</sup> The investigation in this case, published in the *Boston Globe* in 1993, was consented to in advance by the subject, basketball player M. L. Carr (Husselbee 146).

<sup>10</sup> This formulation, a particularly happy one in my view, was based by Deni Elliott on an interview with Professor George Reedy.

<sup>11</sup> With regard to journalistic authenticity, Daniel Cornu writes that "on the horizon of narration [. . .], authenticity occupies [. . .] a place analogous to those occupied by objectivity and impartiality in, respectively, the observation and the interpretation of current events" (403).

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**Mário Mesquita** teaches Journalism and Media Studies at the Escola Superior de Comunicação Social and at the Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias. He is a member of the Executive Council of the Luso-American Foundation (FLAD) in Lisbon. He completed graduate studies in journalism and media at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. He was the executive editor of two daily papers, *Diário de Notícias* (1978–86) and *Diário de Lisboa* (1989–90), president of the Press Council, and the ombudsman of *Diário de Notícias* (1996–97). Following the Portuguese democratic revolution, he was elected Member of the National Constituent Assembly (1975) and Member of Parliament (1976–78). He is the author of several books and articles on journalism and media, namely the influential *O quarto equívoco. O poder dos media na sociedade contemporânea* (2003). He received journalistic prizes from the Portuguese Press Club (1986); from Casa de Imprensa, for his professional career (1987); and from Clube dos Jornalistas, for his job as news ombudsman (1998).