

The Soundslide Report

Innovative Journalism or Misplaced Works of Art?

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Abstract

The audio slideshow – or soundslide report – represents a new format for journalistic reporting on online news sites. It is not very widely used, but it has certain discursive and aesthetic potentials indicating that it could contribute substantially to the ecology of journalistic genres. The article offers an illustration and discussion of these potentials, asking how the format communicates and how it affects journalism in general. Starting out with a close reading of a sample text and a discussion of the format's position in a network of genres, the article concludes that the soundslide report belongs to a new wave of "aesthetic journalism", where journalism and art intersect.

Keywords: aesthetic journalism, genre studies, multimodality, visual culture, digital communication, social semiotics

Introduction

In the digital media landscape, new technological affordances are paving the way for genre innovation in many fields, one of these being photojournalism. The object of interest in the present article is the audio slideshow, also known as the soundslide, a digital format featuring a series of still images coupled with a soundtrack.¹ The soundslide report represents an emerging journalistic genre in which the still picture is the dominant resource for meaning-making. What and how does the soundslide report communicate? And what is it doing to journalism, a discursive practice regulated by strong traditions and specific social obligations?²

Photojournalism is being stimulated by many aspects of the new digital media environment. Production and selection of photos is fast. Image resolution is good – even for large images. And there are hardly any limits to how many images you can offer in a slide show, which allows the development of new photojournalistic formats and genres. Photo galleries can now be found in most any online newspaper – either as independent formats or as part of traditional news reports (Caple and Knox 2012). However, the multimodal format investigated here, the soundslide, is far less common.³ In Scandinavia, only a handful of online newspapers offer soundslide reports on a regular basis.⁴ Moreover, the reports available can vary substantially regarding both formal and interactional characteristics.⁵ Obviously, the journalistic soundslide report represents a format that has not yet been established as a genre, with clear conventions governing their design and use. Still, the present article will argue that the format represents semiotic and discursive

potentials that may give it an important niche position in the ever-widening specter of journalistic genres. In particular, it is interesting to examine the format's potential to strengthen the aesthetic aspects of journalism, understood as those aspects of expression that engage the user through formal innovation and semantic openness.

Methodological Considerations

The questions formulated in the article's opening paragraph are closely related. In order to answer the essential question of how an emerging genre – the soundslide report – may influence an institutionalized field of discursive and social practices – journalism – one must first consider how specific realizations of the emerging genre work as a form of communication: WHAT (sorts of) content is communicated, and HOW is it done? The article follows the assumption that genres are analyzed through text analysis and evaluated through comparison and contextualization (cf. Lüders et al. 2010).

To answer the initial questions, the article starts out with a close reading of a sample text, namely a soundslide report from Congo, published on the website of the influential Norwegian tabloid VG in 2009.⁶ In order to reveal the meaning potentials and the multimodal interplay in the report, we will initially approach the report from perspectives offered by the social semiotic tradition of text and discourse analysis.

In order to examine the sample text as a member of a genre family, the article thereafter draws lines to current and historical genres with similar features. Underlying this examination is the view that any utterance gains meanings and functions from its relation to similar expressions. Finally, approaching the issue of how the soundslide format influences the development of journalism in general, the article reflects on the format as an arena where journalism and art intersect.

Methodologically, the approach can thus be characterized as a typical bottom-up approach, where a case is examined from different perspectives, providing input to reflections on ever more abstract levels of understanding. The case itself has been partially randomly selected. However, for the present project, it was desirable to find a sample text that, in addition to carrying the distinctive visual qualities of the soundslide report, was also recognized by an affiliation with the social obligations of journalism. Thus, the case chosen captures our attention both because of its intrinsic value as a work and by virtue of its value as a representative of a larger group of similar expressions.

In addition, the case offers a starting point for methodological modeling, given that studies of new textual genres invoke many different methodological approaches. While studying a new phenomenon using a bottom-up approach is hardly innovative, within studies of computer mediated communication (cmc), it is less common to combine a social semiotic close reading of a digital work with discussions of its wider discursive and social implications. In this respect, the article is inspired by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional method for critical discourse analysis, although it seeks to be critical in a cultural and not political sense (see Fairclough 1995).

Theoretical Framework

Following the method of investigation, the analysis is based on two theoretical frameworks. Social semiotic theory of meaning-making guides the initial part of the analysis,

while neo-rhetorical genre theory supports the discussion of genre relations. The article is also informed by theory concerning the interplay between aesthetic and journalistic text functions.

Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodal Meaning-making

Rooted in the functional language theory of the Australian linguist Michael Halliday, social semioticians study any meaningful utterances with respect to three universal types of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and compositional. Ideational meanings concerns the semiotic representation of an experienced reality, i.e. the ways in which aspects of reality are formulated by the utterance in question.

The interpersonal meanings of an utterance concern its potential abilities to establish, confirm or change the social relations between the participants involved in the discourse. Compositional meanings concern the mechanisms that contribute to the establishment of a unified and coherent utterance, creating a text out of a diverse group of text elements. While Halliday examined verbal language exclusively, his followers have expanded the perspective to apply to any form of meaningful expression applied in the social life of human beings (Halliday 1985, van Leeuwen 2005, Kress 2010).

Genre as a Recognizable Form of Communication

The text analyzed here is understood as a representative of an emerging genre. It is the prevailing genre conventions that determine the social functions of the expression studied, and thereby also the kind of analytical approach that is most relevant. The approach chosen is based on a neo-rhetorical genre concept, meaning that genre is understood as a recognizable form of communication defined by a set of conventions developed through repeated use in certain types of social situations (Lüders et al. 2010, Miller 1984). Genre conventions can be linked to both content and form, but it is the expression's function in the social situation that over time regulates the conventions concerning both form and content. Genre conventions belong to the common properties of a culture, similar to rituals and traditions (Lüders et al. 2012).

One important aspect of the neo-rhetorical concept of genre is that it is a dynamic entity: Genres are always evolving. Technological, social, and cultural changes involve both new affordances and new needs in terms of human communication, and because the genre conventions regulate our communicative behavior, changes of these conventions always involve new criteria for what constitutes efficient communication. Lüders et al. (2010) believe that the strongest proponent of genre development today is the rapid development of media technology. Insights into the ways in which genres are subject to change in new digital environments thus represent a significant social capital in our culture. Furthermore, it is assumed that genres can be grouped in "families" characterized by either close or loose relationships. This means that genres may never be understood as isolated entities, but rather as members of both synchronous and diachronic networks. They have a history, and they have a close affinity to similar genres – in one or more ways (Swales 2004, Fairclough 2003).

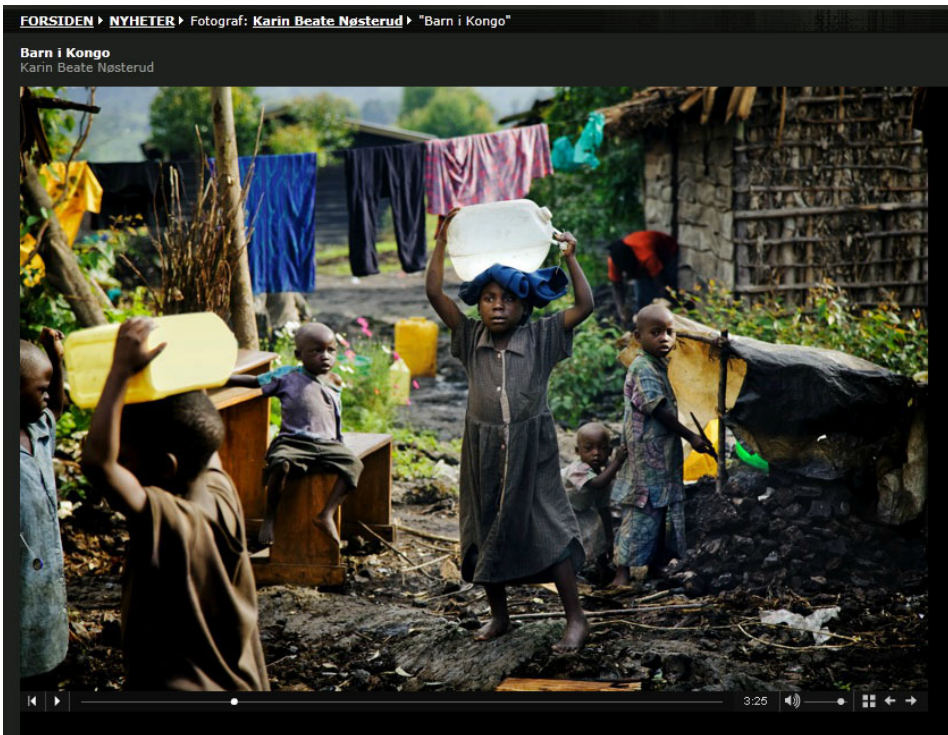
While the concept of format has similarities with the concept of genre, it is not as broad. In this context, format should be understood as a concept that solely concerns formal aspects of utterances; it refers to a standardized pattern, or template, for how

certain text elements and modes of expression can be combined (Kvåle 2012). Formats are medium-specific but not genre-specific, which means that the format of the sound-slides examined here is not conceivable in media other than digital screen media. (But one can well imagine the format used in genres other than journalistic reports.) As we shall later see, the format is also well suited to digital storytelling within educational or therapeutic settings. However, when a format develops a high degree of standardization and is used in predictable ways within a particular communicative field, we can speak of the development of a genre.

Children in Congo – Viewed through the Camera Lens

Children in Congo is the title of a soundslide report produced by photographer Karin Beate Nøsterud and published on the news site *VG Nett* in 2009.⁷ We start the analysis ”in media res” by selecting one single image and studying it as a particular visual phenomenon. Then we comment on the image as part of a larger textual entirety before relating this entirety to an outer context of publishing. In the next section, we will discuss the text as representative of an evolving genre, characterized by its relations to other texts with similar features.

III. 1. *Photograph selected from the soundslide report Children in Congo by Karen Beate Nøsterud*



Note: The series was first published on the Norwegian news site *VG Nett* in February, 2009. (Downloaded February 2nd, 2012).

The picture shows a 7- to 8-year-old child in a central position, and five other children in more secluded or peripheral positions. The surroundings are humble. We see a primitive hut in the background, clothes hanging out to dry and a pile of stones with a plastic cover over them (possibly a provisional stove for cooking?) Two of the children are involved in some activity by the stone pile, while another is sitting on something that looks like a school desk. All children are of African appearance. They are wearing clothes, but not shoes. The child at the center of the viewer's attention is standing straight and has a serious facial expression, looking at something just to the left of the photographer. The child is balancing a half-full water jug on top of a blue towel worn on the head. One of the other children in the picture is also carrying a water jug, indicating that this activity is common for these children.

This is how we can describe the motif of the image, its denotative level of representation. With regard to the viewer, it appears as an obvious fact that the depicted children are living in poverty and must carry out physically demanding tasks in spite of their young age. However, the picture also indicates that they are relatively well nourished, have access to water and clothing and are free to enjoy the company of other children.

When we take a closer look at the child in the picture's central position, it becomes clear that the image establishes a social relation between the child and the viewer. However, this relation is not one of closeness, as it bears no sign of intimacy. Although the child's face is exposed, the distance makes it unclear whether the child is someone that we can relate to as an individual person or as a random representative of a large group of "poor children". Still, the viewer is invited into the child's world – an invitation not accompanied by a claim of specific attention or action, but rather offering a sort of temporary, mediated companionship. The angle of the shot implies that the viewer is looking slightly down at the child, just as an adult person would do when meeting a child without crouching down to his or her level.⁸

What kinds of associations and emotions are aroused in the viewer when looking at this picture? Probably a recognition of "the poor Africa", the stereotypical image of a continent haunted by misery and poverty, child labor and difficult conditions for upbringing and life in general. At the same time, the child (it is difficult to determine whether it is a girl or a boy) in the center of the picture radiates a strong viability. The body's confident stance and robust capacity, the transparency of the face and gaze, all suggest a child with a capacity for survival in the midst of poor surroundings. So the picture is ambiguous, as it tells a story of both poverty and strength. The story is told through a metonymic symbolism, enabling specific sections of a depicted reality to represent concepts and values belonging to a more abstract level of experience.

The Image Integrated in a Multimodal Ensemble

The image is the ninth in a series of 53 photographs. In addition, the report includes nine slides with verbal texts placed at irregular intervals in between the images. The slides automatically alternate every 4.5 seconds; thus, it takes four and a half minutes to look through the whole report if viewed in automatic mode.

The soundtrack of Children in Congo consists of three separate elements of singing, apparently recorded "on location" with some realistic noise in the background, providing a background of shifting moods for the images and a shifting verbal contextualization.

First, we hear half a minute with a cheerful “Good Morning Everyone”, sung by children together with a single adult male voice – a class with a teacher? This song slides directly into a soft and low female voice singing an African song. It is this song that is playing on the soundtrack while we are looking at the picture of the child with the water jug on its head. The song lasts for more than 2.5 minutes and is both beautiful and melancholic. While it sounds like a lullaby, this association is disturbed by the fact that we hear children talking and playing in the background. During the last part of the report, a group of children sings “Bring back my friend to me, to me”, using the melody “My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean.” The tone is lively, but the words are sad and bitter.

Any attempt to browse the soundslide report without sound leaves you with a feeling of interacting with a completely different work. The work loses an important element of cohesion, as the songs create a wholeness that counteracts the fragmented impressions offered by the photos. It also loses its emotional background, alternating from the cheerful (the “good morning song”), via the melancholic (the “lullaby”) to the sad (“bring back my friend”). The shifting moods of the soundtrack appear through the combination of the acoustic material (children’s voices), the movements of the melody lines and the songs’ verbal content. The sound-track offers an alternative framework for interpretation of the images, in addition to the one offered by the verbal text slides, which we will soon address more closely. The images are thus accompanied by two sets of interpretative frameworks, which partly complement each other harmoniously (especially in the last part, during the “bring back” song) and partly create an obvious tension (especially in the first part, where the cheerful morning song accompanies the brutal text slides.)

Let us at this point make a further comment on the written elements of the soundslide report, as they offer brief yet brutal statements about the living conditions of Congo’s children. The statements inform the reader about murder and rape, neglect and people on the run. There are nine of these posters in addition to a brief introduction. Here are some examples (my translation):

Slide 4: Children are kidnapped and used as sex slaves and child soldiers, and they become part of the conflict themselves.

Slide 6: They are forced to torture and murder, often after having seen their own family members being subjected to the same treatment.

Slide 20: At least 300,000 people have been forced to flee the violence of eastern Congo since last fall. Half of them are children.

It is only in the lead paragraph as well as in the first and the last text slide that the sources behind the verbal statements are given, which are Gro Brækken, Secretary General of Save the Children, Norway and a report recently published by the United Nations. This probably means that all claims should be linked to these two sources – but this is not stated explicitly, and it is therefore impossible to know whether the UN report mentioned at the very end is the basis for all of Brækken’s claims. Neither are we informed about who is to be credited for the artistic and technical content on the soundtrack. For example, on the introductory slide, only one person is given credit, namely the photographer. So while it may be assumed that she is also the person behind the text editing and the soundtrack, the exact identities of all producing agents remain somewhat unclear.

Should we choose to read the verbal elements of the soundslide report in the same manner as we read a traditional news report, it would be easy to point to deviations from the norm. In a traditional reportage, the journalist would be careful to mention the sources behind all statements in order to make them trustworthy and verifiable. Further, she would normally supply certain information that could raise the level of precision in the story, including more detailed information about where the pictures were taken and the extent of the reported kidnapping and sexual slavery. However, in the present context, the verbal elements seem to work primarily as a general framework of understanding for the reading of the images, not as exact and verified information in the traditional journalistic sense. The fact that the soundslide report has passed the desk of Norway's perhaps most professional media house also suggests that it has not been internally evaluated according to traditional journalistic standards.

What, then, do the other pictures in the series show? All the images have motifs showing children – and sometimes adults – in poor, provisional surroundings, with belongings packed in plastic bags lying in and around primitive tents or huts. Still, the emotional mood of the images varies from the utterly hopeless, through the sad and melancholic to the vigorous and optimistic. The image below is an example of the latter.

III. 2. *A Playful Shower under the Blue Sky*



Note: The picture is no. 30 in the series.

Because the images are presented as a textual whole, it is natural to look for an overarching principle that creates coherence and confirms this wholeness. It is, however, difficult to find any clear narrative structures in the work. We do not follow any specific

individuals, and there are no temporal or causal lines that indicate any specific progress of action, any goals of agency or any clear moral. Yet the report clearly offers a sense of dramaturgic tension that is not rooted in the linear sequence of the slides, but rather in the composition of images with different moods as well as in the multimodal interaction between images, words and songs. In this interaction, there are both mechanisms of cohesion, creating a unified whole, and elements of tension and contrast, causing ruptures in the same whole. More significantly, these ruptures appear to create opportunity for the readers' interpretation, questions and wonder.

In the interplay between images, sound and verbal elements in the soundslide report, a dynamic variation can thus be observed between harmony and disharmony, cohesion and tension. Such a variation is normally expected to be found in works of art, more rarely in journalism. Indeed, the presence of sensory and semantic tension in the former is often seen as the very sign of aesthetic value. The reception theorist Wolfgang Iser (1978) explicitly links the literary work's "aesthetic effect" to "the gaps" that the work leaves for the reader to fill in.

From Extension of News report to Autonomous Work

In VG Nett's section of soundslide reports, there is no contextualizing information to be found about the background of Children in Congo – except for a date of publication: Saturday, February 16th, 2009. When we type the title in Google in order to find more information, it turns out that the series was published four days after a news report on the same topic, and the same sources were published both in print and online by VG.⁹ On the same Saturday, a photo report was also published in the printed weekend magazine, VG Helg. The news story states that the matter is newsworthy because Congo is "now" ranked as the worst place in the world in which to grow up. The story includes a lengthy interview with the Norwegian leader of Save the Children, Gro Brækken, who has recently visited the country. The news report was written by journalist Svein Kjølberg, and it also contains two photos by Karin Beate Nøsterud, the photographer behind the soundslide report. The soundslide report is advertised explicitly in the news story:

PS! On Saturday you can see VG photographer Karin Beate Nøsterud's photos from Congo in a soundslide special here on VG Nett. (My translation)

We can therefore conclude that the soundslide report represents the photographer's version of the story, while her pictures used in the regular news coverage work more on the writing journalist's premises. Because the soundslide report has been available for years after its initial publication in VG Nett – in the section entitled "Soundslide Reports", and with no links to the news item – it is only the very first readers who would naturally link the two items together. To all subsequent readers, Children in Congo appears as an autonomous and independent work of photojournalism.

Gaining Identity through Genre Relations

The first parts of this analysis have accounted for some aspects of the textual and discursive characteristics of the soundslide report Children in Congo, examined in order to illuminate both the text itself and the digital format it represents. To evaluate the

published work as a representative of an emerging genre, we must consider its relations to similar texts. What "family relations" are in play here, providing relevant frameworks for the use and reception of *Children of Congo*, and contributing to its potentials for social impact? In the following section, we will respond to these questions by comparing the report to four related genres. The family bonds are of different sorts – historical, formal and thematic. Still, they all contribute to positioning *Children in Congo* within a recognizable network of related genres and texts.

Photojournalism

Because *Children in Congo* has been published as an editorial product on the news site VG Nett, it is obvious that the work can and should be received as a piece of journalism. It must thus respond to the demands and ideals of journalism, which are fundamentally about making current events and conditions in the world known to the general public in a comprehensible and engaging manner.¹⁰ Based on a broad mapping of relevant studies, the Australian linguist John Knox identifies six typical characteristics and functions of journalistic photos (Knox 2009):

They:

- a) are related to a specific event, a "here and now"
- b) provide documentation for the claims made in the present case
- c) document that representatives from the news house were present on the site
- d) capture a certain critical moment
- e) tell a story
- f) pay attention to the human and emotional aspects of a case

If we try to evaluate the images of *Children in Congo* on the basis of Knox's categories, we can conclude that they only work as documentation to a limited degree. They do not confirm the claims made in the verbal slides, as no instances of abuse can be seen in the pictures. It can be argued that while they document the everyday life of children in a situation of fear and escape from abuse, this is done on a very general level. We never get to know who is depicted, where they are, from whom they are fleeing or where they are heading. Basic journalistic norms thus seem to have been violated in this instance.

One might further claim that the pictures document that VG's photographer has been present on the relevant scene of action. But strictly speaking, the pictures could have been taken many other places on the African continent under conditions not directly connected to murder and abuse. Further, the pictures do not fit well into the categories d and e in Knox's system, grouping pictures that capture a critical moment and tell a story. It is the last point on Knox's list that makes the strongest resonance with the images of *Children in Congo*, as it is the point with the weakest links to "hard", fact-oriented news journalism. The quality and distinctiveness of the images rests on the encounters with other living individuals that the viewers are offered – encounters with their fate, their daily life and their interpersonal relationships. These encounters take place from a distance, but they still touch us.

The Photo Essay

Looking back at the former section, we can argue that *Children in Congo* is anchored as strongly in the genre of the photo essay as it is in the more news-oriented traditions of journalistic photography. The photo essay was particularly popular within "the illustrated press" of the 1930s, with flagships like *American Life Magazine* (1936-1972) and *British Picture Post* (1938-1957).¹¹ While the typical news photographer is most keen on capturing one crucial moment, the idea behind the photo essay is to create a coherent whole out of a series of images. The successful photo essay is based on one strong idea, and the images are related in ways that make them something more than just a series of good shots. Photo essays need not have a continuous narrative structure, but they often have an initial image that indicates a setting and thematic focus as well as a visual conclusive climax. Most important, however, is the belief that the images should strengthen and comment on each other in addition to referring to a clear sender – a visual essayist (see Caple and Knox 2012).

Digital Storytelling

The soundslide report *Children in Congo* also has family bonds that reach beyond the world of journalism. For instance, genre relations based purely on the format and style of expression can be traced to the domains of pedagogy and therapy. The common denominator is the concept of digital storytelling, and central to the concept is a set of digital tools and techniques for combining photos, videos, music, etc., in order to form coherent stories.¹² In the educational system and in certain therapeutic contexts, digital storytelling is used to provide young people or people living a difficult life with tools for articulating themselves in creative ways, the goal being to strengthen their sense of identity or to initiate mental processing of traumatic experience. The underlying idea is that the making of personal digital stories can give ordinary people, especially those who are uncomfortable with writing, a recognizable and unique voice in the digital realm. One assumes that the format is likely to trigger users' creative abilities in ways that enable them to see themselves and the world in new ways.¹³

Thus, we see that a soundslide report like *Children in Congo* has a great deal in common with both photo essays and digital stories as we find them in educational and therapeutic contexts. And the users of the report will presumably be able to draw on their knowledge of any of these genres in their attempt to experience a rich and nuanced reception of the work. But there are also clear differences. Whereas the photo essay seeks to build unity and coherence through image relations alone, the soundslide report leaves a considerable part of the cohesive work to the soundtrack. And if we compare the work of a photojournalist with that of a teacher or a therapist applying digital storytelling, we quickly realize the basic difference between a professional performer's communication of other people's lives and pupils' or clients' communication of their own lives. While the textual products certainly resemble each other in form, they are nevertheless genres with widely different social functions and interpretative frameworks.

Mediated Representations of Human Suffering

A genre relation that follows thematic lines (more than formal or functional ones) makes *Children in Congo* comparable to other representations of human suffering and distress. Depictions of suffering human beings, especially those affected by war and disasters in distant parts of the world, can be seen daily in poster campaigns, TV commercials, documentaries and newspaper reports, often serving the more or less clearly expressed purpose of getting a Western audience to take action by giving money, becoming personal sponsors, etc.

In several of her works, Lilie Chouliaraki discusses both discursive and ethical aspects of the media's dissemination of others' suffering. She believes that representations capable of moving their audiences to a state of responsibility and action are not necessarily those that depict their objects in a state of utter helplessness. Rather, representations that are able to establish a sense of a global community between media users and those in need through a discourse of "cosmopolitan citizenship" appear to have a strong rhetorical effect (Chouliaraki 2008). Members of today's Western media audience are, according to Chouliaraki, reluctant to involve themselves emotionally in distant disorders unless they experience a kind of affinity with the suffering – a certain human, cultural or economic community. From a global community perspective, all will benefit from a situation where as many people as possible assume a position of participating and contributing.

We can recognize similarities between reflective campaign rhetoric and the soundslide report *Children in Congo*. Nonetheless, unlike the soundslide report, the campaign poster is normally rhetorically closed. Readers may be invited to make their own reflections, but the purpose is nevertheless that everyone will end up drawing the same conclusion at the end. Regarding the soundslide report, several conclusions are not only possible, but also equally valued.

Towards a More Emotional or a More Reflective Style of Journalism?

We have seen that new visual formats evolve in the realms of journalism, empowered by the digitization process and gaining formative inspiration from a number of previous genres. They offer new affordances for representation and interaction, and they call for a debate on the implications of visually dominated formats like the one represented by *Children in Congo*. Both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios are offered in the academic discussion of this issue.

The Norwegian media scholar Astrid Gynnild suggests that a greater emphasis on iconic representations in journalism might come at the expense of the factual thoroughness that she identifies as an essential characteristic of good journalism (Gynnild 2009). She points out that the credibility of the representation, viewed as a journalistic document, suffers when images are presented without being exactly pinpointed in time and place.

Gynnild claims that the visual turn in journalism, which she indicates has been especially evident on Norwegian news sites since the end of the past decade, has stimulated a less facts-focused reception of the news. Rather, readers seek forms of infotainment, whereby information is offered through entertainment and recreation. According to Gynnild, several image-based formats tend to present a world where the answers to basic journalistic questions – such as where, when and why – are omitted, while abstracted visual representations of people and environments are placed in the foreground. Follow-

ing Gynnild's argument, one might assume that this "visualized journalism" tends to be more emotional, thus more easily affecting its audience. But it is also less precise, less concrete and thus leaves the audience with less clear alternatives for potential action.

Aesthetic Journalism

A more positive view on the visual and aesthetic developments taking place in journalism is offered by the Italian artist and commentator Alfredo Cramerotti. He states that a remarkable convergence between art and journalism has emerged in recent years (Cramerotti 2009). Journalism has increasingly adopted aesthetic expressions with a focus on form as well as expressive and subjective approaches. At the same time, many artists have, according to Cramerotti, adopted journalistic methods in their desire to document and comment on reality: interviews, field work, information gathering, angling and popularization.

Supporting Cramerotti's statement is the fact that certain press photographers also perform as photo artists – sometimes even with rather similar forms of expression. Photographer Luc Delahaye, who has extensive experience in the famous photo agency Magnum has, for instance, supplied the international press with a number of photos from conflict zones in the Middle East. He has also been represented with similar images – only larger and in extreme resolution – in the Tate Modern art gallery in London.¹⁴

In Cramerotti's view, traditional journalism is struggling with a fundamental problem that runs even deeper than those just mentioned. He believes that journalists base their work on the illusion that they can construct a valid description of reality – objective, balanced and comprehensive – without having to reveal their own positions, agendas and prejudices. He argues that the well-established distinction between news and commentary reflects this illusion, which in Cramerotti's opinion is totally obsolete. According to Cramerotti, the objectivized style of representation characterizing news journalism contributes only to breaking down the confidence of an informed audience, one which has long since recognized that all communication is subjective.

It is in relation to this dilemma – where journalists and photographers are torn between tradition and honesty – that Cramerotti believes the aesthetic approach provides a good solution. The solution is not to pour in more and larger pictures, but to draw the self-reflective mode of art more consciously into journalistic work. In consequence, it means adopting a new approach to the world and journalistic reporting of the world, where the subjective, creative and self-reflective gaze is viewed as a central resource and not an obstacle to objective reporting. Cramerotti writes (2009:28): "If journalism at large can be considered a view of the world (of what happened and its representation), then aesthetics would be the view of the view: a tool to question both the selection of the material delivered, and the specific reasons for why things are selected."

While traditional journalism is, in Cramerotti's view, mainly about providing answers to a set of standardized questions, aesthetic journalism is more about formulating new questions that can help the audience see aspects of reality that rarely are addressed, including aspects of journalism – its methods, its mission and its affordances. Aesthetic journalism is not only about representation, it is also about reflection, including self-reflection and critique of the conventional gaze. And when images and writing, especially when combined, are used to open such questioning and self-reflective spaces, the journalism in question can be called aesthetic journalism. According to Cramerotti,

this is the most exciting and fruitful path to follow for modern journalism. Moreover, it can be developed and exposed both in the press and in art galleries. "In productions like these the documentary, photo-reportage or text-based research is transformed into hybrid information that appeals to a need of knowing, but also to the curiosity, imagination, fears and desires of the public" (Cramerotti 2009: 319).

This outline of aesthetic journalism seems well suited to describing central aspects of the soundslide report *Children in Congo*. The series balances between informativity and documentation, on the one hand, and curiosity, exploration and emotion, on the other. While the verbally-based news item that was published a few days before the soundslide report conveys facts and figures as well as views and pleas from a Western point of view (cf. the statements of the Save the Children official), the soundslide report offers a look into these children's world with a very different transparency and richness of nuance. Although the brutal facts and figures are also present here, the viewer is encouraged to question their value as the only access to these children's world – for example, when they are accompanied by cheerful children's voices singing "Good morning everybody", and when images are exposed that alternate between depressed apathy and caring interaction.

The Soundslide Report – A Hybrid Genre Suited to Our Times?

Journalistic genres inspired by aesthetic genres are nothing new. Indeed, Stefan Jonsson (2004: 66) claims that journalism in a variety of fields has "borrowed" from literature, art and film: "Nineteenth-century realism and naturalism in literature presage documentary reportage in the daily press; avant garde film developed editing techniques that subsequently became the norm in television; dialogic patterns developed in drama and philosophical novels have enriched the journalistic interview; photo journalism has borrowed from the iconography of painting; investigative reporting in both print and broadcast media applies the fluid narrative perspective developed in modernist novels." He further points out that art is always ahead of journalism in its ability to describe "(...) how life and society look, sound, feel, taste – even how they smell" (ibid.:65).

The image of the serious child with the water can on its head makes up a small element in a larger, multimodal whole that is seemingly capable of precisely this – mediating certain sensory experiences from a part of the world to which few of us have access. And this whole is composed so that the alternations between harmony and tension in the interplay between words, images and sounds trigger the viewer to examine, question, imagine and wonder. While the verbal elements of the report probably confirm the image of Congo that many readers already have, the photos and soundclips add new dimensions to the picture. *Children in Congo* thus illustrates the capabilities of the soundslide format as a contemplative and open media format, with a generous space for active interpretation and reflection.

However, if the soundslide report is to develop into a sustainable journalistic genre, one crucial factor for success is probably that the inspiration from art be unfolded within the framework of solid journalistic practice. This means, above all, that established norms for the inclusion of source information and basic facts are followed. True enough, good journalism and politically engaged art have in common the fact that they both seek to uncover hidden truths concerning political and societal issues. And both allow – as Jonsson points out – that human, sensual experiences be used as a starting point, or

common ground, for these descriptions. However, the fact that art and journalism basically belong to two different discursive realms constitutes a barrier to their interaction, as their respective statements serve different purposes and meet different demands from their audiences. Whereas art tends to challenge, journalism tends to confirm. Whereas art raises questions, journalism provides answers. The tension between these two realms of public life also becomes apparent in *Children in Congo*. The work adds a great deal to the journalistic story about the situation in Congo. One can, however, question the adequateness of the soundslide report when viewed as an autonomous journalistic document.

It was stated in the initial paragraph of the present article that new technological affordances are paving the way for genre innovation. However, in order for new genres to achieve success, they must respond to existing needs among potential users (cf. Bazerman et al., 2009). Lilie Chouliaraki (2008) calls for a journalism that encourages its audience to feel, think and act. The analysis and discussion of *Children in Congo* indicates that the soundslide report, as an evolving genre, has the potential to support such forms of journalism. The essential argument of the article is, however, that a vital condition for such a genre development is that both its journalistic and aesthetic qualities be cultivated and strengthened. Such a cultivation requires that all necessary facts and source information be integrated into the format – without the viewer’s interaction with the audiovisual material being distracted. It also requires a multimodal composition that offers readers a coherent textual universe, but at the same time leaves them with ample opportunity for wonder and reflection.

Notes

1. The term “soundslide” is known both as a general concept and as a specific brand of software. In the present article, the term refers to the general media format where a series of stills is combined with an audio track.
2. The article is based on a larger work in Norwegian, see Engebretsen 2013.
3. A survey of 180 major international news websites conducted in 2010 revealed that 7 percent of the sites offered image galleries combined with a soundtrack (Caple & Knox 2012)
4. The claim is based on an examination of 15 major Scandinavian news sites (Engebretsen 2007). A reexamination of the same sites performed in April 2012 revealed that only two of the 15 now offered sections dedicated to soundslide reports; VG.no and Aftonbladet.se.
5. The links below lead to two examples of soundslide reports from renown international news sites, namely the sites of The New York Times and BBC: <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/index.html>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-12785816>
6. VG (Verdens Gang) was from 1981 until 2010 the Norwegian newspaper with the highest circulation, and its news site is likewise among the most popular websites in Norway. In certain respects, VG Nett has also been among the most innovative news sites in Scandinavia when it comes to the exploitation of digital affordances for dynamic and dialogic forms of communication (see Engebretsen 2007).
7. The original title of the work is “Barn i Kongo”. The work can be viewed on <http://www.vg.no/lydbilder/forsiden/vis/id/254>
8. About the display of eyes and faces, and about the claiming or offering of social contact, see Kress & van Leeuwen 2006. About the perception of depicted persons as individual subjects or rather as group members, see Barthes 1977.
9. The news story was entitled “Verdens verste land for barn” (the world’s worst country for children). (<http://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/artikkel.php?artid=547055>)
10. See e.g. Schudson 2003.
11. About the photo essay, see Caple and Knox 2012; Moran 1974.
12. See e.g. Lambert 2009; Hartley et al. 2009.
13. See e.g. Lundby 2008.
14. In the introduction to the exhibition “Photography: New documentary forms”, displayed in Tate Modern from May 2011 to April 2012, where Delahaye was one of the artists, it is stated: “Throughout the twen-

tieth century, photographers have sought new ways to document pressing social and political issues, and sometimes even to influence them. In recent years, however, these same forms of documentary photography – with the kinds of subject matter and perspective familiar from newspapers and magazines – have been produced by artists to be exhibited in museums and galleries.” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/display/photography-new-documentary-forms>)

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