

# CABARET AS NEW JOURNALISM: AN EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE

Coenie de Villiers

## ABSTRACT

In this paper the author attempts to extrapolate Bower's argument (Bower:1990) of cabaret as alternative discourse even further, and seeks to construct an exploratory argument that a measure of cabaret texts may be sufficiently journalistic in style and structure to be considered so-called New Journalism.

The author seeks a common ground between cabaret and New Journalism by defining and tracing the historical development of both phenomena. Signs of Intertextuality are identified and certain stylistic and structural elements of New Journalism are then operationalised in an exploratory and cursory intertextual reading of selected South African cabaret texts.

The paper does not postulate a rigid theoretical framework, but aims to stimulate further discourse and research on the proposed intertextual reading between cabaret and New Journalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been posited that Communication Science per se should attempt to make more of its interdisciplinary nature in order to master the contents of messages in society (De Klerk in Bower:1990). Bower (1990) takes up this challenge in a provocative essay



*Coenie de Villiers is lecturer in the Department of Communication at the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein.*

on cabaret as so-called alternative communicative action.

This paper attempts to extrapolate Bower's argument of cabaret as alternative discourse even further, and will seek to construct an exploratory argument that cabaret ( or at least a measure of cabaret text ) may be sufficiently journalistic in style and structure to be considered New Journalism.

The following arguments do not postulate a rigid theoretical framework, but aim to stimulate further discourse and research on the proposed intertextual reading between cabaret and especially New Journalism.

In essence, a lack of innate respectability is the hallmark of both cabaret and the New Journalism, inasmuch as the spontaneity which lies at the core of both is part of it. Within this context,

it would therefore be wise to heed the danger indicated by Umberto Eco (1987:151): theoretical literature, as is well known, either kills or at least makes "respectable" spontaneous developments.

Whilst steering clear of Eco's theoretical reef, it is, however, of paramount importance to define the concepts cabaret and New Journalism individually, and to give a brief background of the historical development of both phenomena, before the similarities which will make an intertextual reading possible, may be identified.

### DEFINING CABARET

Many authors and dictionaries have attempted to define cabaret. Kolsteren (1981:61) gives the origin of the word as derived from the Arabic *chamarat* or tavern, and describes the cabaret artiste as one who would "musicceert, zingt en voordraagt in café tot onderhoud van gasten; kleurkunstvoorstelling bestaande uit zang, dans, voordracht en conference; kleinkunstgezelschap; kleinkunsttheater".

Taylor (1964:52) extends this description, and maintains that cabaret allows for a more caustic and outspoken text and humour than the entertainment usually aimed at mass audiences.

As a phenomenon cabaret remains hard to define, but certain ideological and structural elements remain relatively constant: satire, music, the ambience of the small stage and intimate audience, a penchant for the avant-garde, etc.. (Appignanesi:1976).

In keeping with the definition posited by Taylor, cabaret has proved to be a recurring leitmotiv in the struggle of especially suppressed societies in finding a means of expression. It satirises socio-political conditions and seeks new forms of artistic and socio-political expression.

One need look no further than the South African cabaret stage to see that it is no exception to the international history of cabaret; the vortex of political change and the turbulence of the past two decades has seen the growth of a strong local cabaret culture which spawned a whole cadre of creators (Kirby, De Vries, Nataniël, Uys, et al.) and cabaret audiences.

Cabaret functions at the cutting-edge of socio-political activities and comment. The body of literature on cabaret follows this socio-political cue, most of it from an historical-analytical point of view (Appignanesi:1984; Ibo:1976, 1981; Henningsen:1967; Otto et al.:1981; Pisuise:1977; etc. ). Ibo (1976:6) adds the extra distinction that cabaret is meant to be performed for intelligent people.

It may be argued that art cannot be deemed "large" or "small", and therefore Ibo (1981:15) suggests the term "Amusementkunst" or amusement art, a definition which somewhat negates the often serious nature of the cabaret text.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of cabaret is that it is – for the most part – a fluid and changing text, often not available in hard-copy form for the purpose of analysis. Diametrically opposed to this form of cabaret, is the cabaret *littéraire* or literary cabaret which Hennie Aucamp of Stellenbosch University ardently champions as creator and foremost theorist.

Aucamp (De Villiers:1992) implicitly gives a succinct summary of literary cabaret by referring to the cabarets of the Weimar period:

Daar was Wedekind, Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Tucholsky en al die ander – ek dink hulle het vir meer as die oomblik geskryf. Byna al die groot momente uit die Weimarjare is op skrif en op

plaats beskikbaar. Ek is geïnteresseerd in 'n soort kabaret wat die mode van die oomblik kan oorleef.

Aucamp (De Villiers:1992) suggests that, as cabaret is fluid, so should an attempt at a definition be. He does, though, quote Bacon (1984:9) in saying that "the word is late though the thing is ancient", and concedes that cabaret is mostly peripheral literature, although it may become part of a nation's cultural heritage and literature.

Viljoen (1988:3) echoes Aucamp in the argument that cabaret is "civilized protest", wanting to involve its audience in an intellectual dialogue. For this cabaret needs an active and shockable public.

Boekooi (1981:10) posits a definition which probably furnishes the most adequate bridge to the later argument of journalistic intertextuality:

Kabaret is meer as 'n spieëlbeeld van die samelewing. Dit reflekteer juis dit wat jy nie oppervlakkig sien nie én ook dit wat jy nie wil sien nie. In die beste tradisie van die kabaret behoort daar iets dekadents te skuil, juis omdat die samelewing hom verskans teen die erkenning dat dit konsuis wél bestaan.

The most irreverent definition of cabaret probably belongs to author and cabaret artiste, Casper de Vries (De Villiers:1991), who simply calls cabaret "a pinch in the thigh of society", something which angers an individual but which may be very charming at the same time.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CABARET

The history of cabaret has been documented extensively (inter alia Ibo:1976,1981; Appignanesi:1984; Pretorius in Aucamp:1986). It is interesting to note – as the definitions allude –

that the history of cabaret in different countries is closely linked to political developments in that country.

In the revitalised Paris of 1881 Rudolphe Salis and author Emile Goudeau create Le Chat Noir in the Montmartre. Actors, writers and musicians remind the establishment that bourgeois values and respectable norms are but a veneer. The rich and famous soon flock to the venue to be satirised and insulted, and to enjoy every moment of it.

Early cabaret was thus an artistic laboratory where unknown poets, chanson-composers and actors could stage their creations themselves and in the process comment on beau monde society (De Villiers:1991).

In the wake of Le Chat Noir, Aristide Bruant continues the fledgling Parisian cabaret and champions cabaret not only as a form of protest, but as a motivational power for the masses, as Appignanesi indicates (1976:30).

The development of cabaret in Germany is more serious, satirical and aggressive. In the wake of Nietzsche and under the influence of rumours of French cabaret, a tide of satirical publications under the auspices of inter alia Wedekind, Langen and Bierbaum take up the gauntlet: "Applied lyric – that is our battle cry" (Ibid., 1976:32). The content of the work becomes more literary as figures such as Max Reinhardt and others join the fold.

Münchener cabaret shocks and provokes; under the lyrical and playful surface, the works of especially Ringelnatz and Mühsam display a deep human involvement and criticism of hypocrisy.

Mühsam is killed by the German SS in 1933 for the content of his cabarets, but the severe suppression of the cabaret during the Nazi years in Germany

cannot kill what by now is a resilient medium, and in the post-war years Steinberg, Dietrich and Kästner continue the cabaret tradition. The Weimar cabaret is particularly deftly critiqued by Aucamp (1977:1-10).

The Berlin Wall and the separation of East and West add fuel to many cabaret fires; it is no surprise that Brecht says about the cabaret: "It was intended to have the explosive power of a clenched fist" (Appignanesi, 1976: 172). Johnson (1988:173), writing on Brecht, underlines this point of view: "Those who want to influence men's minds have long recognized that the theatre is the most powerful medium through which to make the attempt."

The history of cabaret is simply too complex and textured to discuss within the confines of this article. Suffice to outline the broad patterns of development, one of which is that cabaret thrives in times rife with (dis)satisfaction, unemployment, and want (Mandl, 1969:25).

Its political nature is predominant: "Cabaret (was) een politiek pamflet in theatervorm" (Ibo, 1981:25). The political discourse of cabaret is extended to remind the audience that there are those who strive to achieve other things than wage war and be a patriot (Ball, 1916:14). Its history is characterised by the fact that it is allowed to call attention to what everyone knows, but no one dares say aloud (Gerould, 1979:54), which reiterates Bouwer's (1990) argument that cabaret is in essence alternative communication.

## DEFINING NEW JOURNALISM

Defining New Journalism is no less problematic than attempting to define cabaret. Even a cursory reading of critiques concerning New Journalism reflect a wide spectrum of thoughts and definitions.

Perhaps Carlean (1988:iii) sums up the problematic nature of defining New Journalism best when he comments on the non-fiction novel:

...There have been many attempts to define and explain the phenomenon of the "non-fiction novel" as a unified narrative genre. Some of these attempts have been highly theoretical and scholarly, but most have been rather loose definitions referring to an extremely wide range of diverse factual narratives.

Hellman (1981:17) defines New Journalism as being the journalistic result, a kind of new fiction, when facts are communicated by virtue of fantasy or fictional techniques.

Gay Talese (in Mills, 1974:12) formulates as succinct a definition as New Journalism will allow:

The new journalism, though reading like fiction, is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reportage although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form. The new journalism allows, demands in fact, a more imaginative approach to reporting, and it permits the writer to inject himself into the narrative if he wishes.

The definitions other authors offer are more nebulous. Merrill (1977:50) maintains that New Journalism in its generalized meaning is mainly concerned with form and style – or with an anti-establishment bias predominantly, or confronting public taste through the use of four-letter words and unorthodox ideas, subjects and pictures. He

posits that the New Journalism unites the non-conformists of the world.

The torch-bearer of the New Journalism, Tom Wolfe (1990:28), is excited by the notion that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream of consciousness, to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.

Burd (1987:89) lends a different slant to New Journalism when he considers the New Journalist someone who wishes to use his imaginative powers and fictional craft to seek out and construct truth.

Crump (1974:51) soberly argues that journalism is really always "new", with innovations becoming traditions which eventually must be broken to make way for new developments that meet the public's always growing and changing tastes.

Franklin (1987:8) maintains that Tom Wolfe coined the phrase New Journalism, a fact which Wolfe himself disputes (1990:37): "I have no idea who coined the term ... New Journalism." Franklin continues by expressing a preference for the term literary journalism.

Wolfe (1990:37) argues that he does not even like the term New Journalism: "I've never liked the term. Any movement, group, party, programme, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with 'New' in it, is just begging for trouble."

Tom Wolfe does, however, offer a viable alternative epithet for this very distinctive genre of journalism: "Saturation reporting ... can be one of the most exhilarating trips in the world." (1990:68). Here Wolfe is referring to the dense and detailed style of New Journalistic reportage which often lists objects and minutiae to give the reader a

more complete picture or "truth." (See also MacDougall, 1977:183).

Other terms used to describe what is commonly referred to as New Journalism, include:

- The non-fiction novel (Capote in Wolfe, 1990:41)
- Alternative journalism (Crowell, 1975:22)
- Underground journalism (Metzler, 1977:106)
- Advocacy journalism (Crowell, 1975:22)
- Now journalism (Hulteng, 1973:133)
- New non-fiction (Crowell, 1975:22)
- Literary \*newswriting (Berner, 1986:1)

Wilkins (1989) interchanges the terms New Journalism and Literary Journalism in an article which points out that literary journalism has relied heavily on both humanistic and social science literature. He points out that Eason (1982) approaches literary journalism as a journalism which, through the literary techniques traditionally considered the tools of the fiction writer, treats events as symbols of some deeper cultural trend, ideology or mythology. Thus, literary journalism may be defined as a self-conscious attempt to place a factual "story" into a deeper cultural context.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEW JOURNALISM**

As Franklin points out (1987:10): "Literary journalism has a long historical context and cannot be adequately understood without it."

Some authors would take the advent of New Journalism as far back as the nineteenth century with Joseph Pulitzer's radical approach to revitalizing the "New York World" (Emery, 1972:307-318). His aggressive editorial style and fresh journalistic approach may have foreshadowed New Journal-

ism, although other authors maintain that there is nothing new about New Journalism at all (Flippen, 1974:19; Crump, 1974:51; Hulteng, 1973:125).

Crump (1974:51) argues that New Journalism was indeed practised by Elizabeth Cochran (Nellie Bly) in 1890 as she feigned madness to get to the core of a story.

Tom Wolfe maintains that journalists started experimenting in 1965 with new styles (Mills, 1974:15). The years 1965/6 were chrysalis periods from which authors such as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin emerged; "Esquire" and "The New York Herald" championed these writers, as did "The Village Voice".

This view is shared by Hellman (1981) who points out that 1965 was the year in which Tom Wolfe's seminal "Kandy Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" and Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" appears.

Throughout the remainder of the turbulent sixties the brace of writers practising the New Journalism battle with the dichotomy of trying to find the fictional tool to tell a factual tale without destroying his or her status as journalist.

The collective psyche of the sixties – irrevocably scarred by the assassination of Kennedy, the Viet-Nam war and the riots of 1968 – charged counter-culture movements with an electricity which spawned an alternative press ( and style of writing ); it shied away from traditional objectivity and the strictures of grammar, and experimented with styles and four-letter words (MacDougall, 1987:90).

This, combined with a wish to return to quality factual reporting, created a void for in-depth reporting which could accommodate the new-found styles and freedom of writing. The stage for the New Journalism was set: " It is no

longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact " (Hulteng, 1973:134).

## **SIGNS OF INTERTEXTUALITY**

A wide spectrum of core and peripheral literature on journalism and cabaret indicate that there might be a shared common ground between the two phenomena.

Merrill (1984) argues that journalism is a kind of camouflaged fiction, where the world is, in effect, created by the journalist to suit his own whims and desires. Journalism in Merrill's context is little more than subjective world-building.

Tuchman (1980:5) argues that news, i.e. journalism, should be classified with other stories and assumes that stories are the product of cultural resources and active negotiations. When read against the various definitions of cabaret, Tuchman's exposition of the nature of news indicates more than a measure of intertextuality:

But, ultimately, both the fairy tale ( read cabaret text ) and the news account are stories, to be passed on, commented upon, and recalled as individually appreciated public resources. Both have a public character in that both are available to all, part and parcel of our cultural equipment. Both draw on the culture for their derivation ... Both take social and cultural resources and transform them into public property: Jack Kennedy and Jack of beanstalk fame are both cultural myths, although one lived and the other did not.

When the entertainment function of cabaret (Ibo, 1981:15) is borne in mind, and the cultural context of both journalism and storytelling/myth-making/ca-

baret text is taken into consideration, Curran's argument (Curran et al., 1991:215-237) that the entertainment value of the press as a phenomenon of popular culture is underrated, becomes relevant. He also makes the moot point that, in the past, the entertainment function of the press has been ignored because most researchers have been interested only in the political role of the press.

But not only journalism pre-occupies itself with change and politics. As the various definitions indicate, cabaret documents this dynamic process in society. Mikis Theodorakis, in an impassioned plea for political relevancy in Greek music and cabaret (Giannaris, 1973:xviii) sees every act of ( musical ) creation as a revolution, affirmative action against political oppression and cultural stagnation.

As newspapers document the times and express both political and cultural aspirations, so do music and cabaret. Fairley (1989:1-30) writes on Chilean music and cabaret and posits that the nature of the relationship between music and politics is one of transformation: both musical and verbal texts are perceived to express the social and political struggle and experiences of the people.

In defining politics within the ambit of music, Dunaway (in Lull, 1989:37) postulates that while political music often has its roots in traditional song and balladry, it is not often popular music – parameters which align with the concept of having small audiences for cabaret. Dunaway continues to argue that the most comprehensive definition of political music would take into account its specific context: the communicative function of a particular work in a particular setting at a particular place in time. Once again this aligns with the generally accepted definitions of cabaret.

If this argument is extended, and Dunaway's point of view that the lyrics of songs ( read cabaret text ) inevitably express the world-view of their authors, it follows that the text and music becomes an historical indicator sharing function and structure with journalism (in Lull, 1989:38-39).

Lull's argument (1989:19) that the mass media are effective means of information sharing and political organizing, i.e tools of subcultural protest, may now be construed as to include music lyrics and by implication cabaret text. If this premise is accepted, cabaret may be included within the ambit of mass media, a forum thus implicitly shared with journalism per se.

Structural commonality for an intertextual reading between in particular New Journalism and cabaret may now be analysed.

### **INTERTEXTUALITY BETWEEN NEW JOURNALISM AND CABARET**

As mentioned earlier, the study of cabaret is hampered by the lack of available text, and a preliminary intertextual reading therefore relies heavily on what is deemed literary cabaret.

It is important that any subsequent analysis should be read against the background of the foregoing arguments and definitions, i.e. that cabaret is usually political, critical of social ills, etc., as is much of journalism.

The lack of a structural framework for this kind of analysis on either the side of cabaret or of New Journalism/journalism/news studies, indicates fertile ground for further research. ( A possible theoretical model for analysis could be De Beer's 1977 model of news values, articulating a potential content analysis of cabaret texts. )

For the purpose of this article, which is exploratory by its very nature, an arbitrary selection of criteria which dis-

tinguish New Journalism are identified; these may be read intertextually with existing cabaret texts.

### **Narrative dimension**

As narrative structure as such is used in a qualified sense as far as New Journalism is concerned, the term narrative dimension is preferred.

New Journalism does not only shuffle information in its restructuring of reality for the reader, but carefully selects and restructures information in the basic narrative pattern utilised in fiction. Its product, in short, is not just data, but also a pattern into which data can fit. Readers read such stories not because they're more comprehensive, but because they are more comprehensible (Franklin, 1987:10).

This style of scenario-sketching is confirmed by Hollowell (Berner, 1986:7) in that the New Journalist uses literary techniques to convey information and to provide background not usually possible in most newspaper and magazine reporting – journalism allows its readers to witness history; fiction gives its readers the opportunity to live it.

Tom Wolfe (1990:46) describes some of the techniques which add a narrative dimension to reportage. These are, as in the case with other authors, compared to examples from existing cabaret texts. ( As these techniques are documented as techniques used virtually throughout the genre of New Journalism, particular examples are not cited within the limitations of this paper. ):

1) Technique: Scene-by-scene construction, in other words telling the story by moving from one scene to the next without adhering to an historical chronology;

Cabaret reading: Structurally Aucamp's Oudisie (1991), portions of Slegs vir Almal (1986) as well as

Met Permissie Gesê (1980) would conform with the use of this technique. Vignettes are loosely related ( refer to the leitmotiv of the audition in the cabaret Oudisie), whilst the author uses the internal freedom that this narrative device furnishes to shift time and space from vignette to vignette.

Nataniël's Dancing with John (1991) in which the protagonist travels through the country but experiences and relates similarly disjointed incidents would, by the same token, qualify.

2) Technique: Realistic dialogue, where journalists would document dialogue to give the reportage a realistic edge.

Cabaret reading: A glut of cabaret texts would qualify. A notable example would be Aucamp's Blomtyd is Bloeityd (1988) in the stark and moving dialogue between Mavis and Myrtle, two ladies of dubious morals and persuasions, or between the tramp and his bag-lady.

3) Technique: The use of the third-person point of view, which gives the reader a perspective from within the character's mind;

Cabaret reading: Again Blomtyd is Bloeityd (1988) by Aucamp comes to mind in the monologue spoken by the precocious Soekie, searching her innermost self and finally arriving at a twisted morality.

4) Technique: The fourth technique is that of documenting everyday trivia: mannerisms, styles of dress, quirks, etc..

Cabaret reading: In One Life (1990) Nataniël describes in minute detail the behavioural patterns and oddities of a cockroach surviving a nuclear holocaust; in Summertime (1990) he follows suit with a de-



scription of a civil servant falling from grace in a song called "Blues is jou Ma". Casper de Vries has used detailed descriptions of mannerisms and styles of dress to parody celebrities and politicians on numerous occasions.

Hollowell adds two more techniques (in Carlean, 1988:3):

- 5) Technique: The use of internal monologue;

Cabaret reading: Aucamp uses this device effectively in the cabaret Blomtyd is Bloityd (1988) in the monologue by Ounie, a widow desperately longing for her late husband.

- 6) Technique: Composite characterisation.

Cabaret reading: In Oudisje (1991) Aucamp fabricates a composite character in the character Nataniël represents by utilising high camp and costume techniques to cross-reference the Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu nations; the "package" is a Miriam Makeba-like character which combines composite characterisation into political statement.

When the above techniques are implemented, the journalistic authority of the New Journalist becomes problematic. In an attempt to broach this credibility gap, three further techniques are identified by Zelizer (1990:368-373). Note that these techniques are employed to bridge what could be called the gap between fiction and fact; techniques designed to prevent reportage to breach the threshold to fiction.

These techniques are generally superfluous as far as cabaret is concerned; cabaret need not keep up a pretence of fact and "reality"; it can afford the luxury of breaching the fiction threshold, despite the

content of the text being anchored in reality.

- 7) Technique: Synecdoche or replacement as a narrative strategy would use part of an incident/opportunity to represent a whole, or to give authority to the whole body of reportage;
- 8) Technique: Omission, as does synecdoche, re-arranges events and time, and omits the re-telling of various role-players in the action;
- 9) Technique: Personalisation, whereby journalists will re-construct events in terms of their own experience; a highly subjective construct of events.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Cabaret and New Journalism are two phenomena reflecting the particular culture of the times, rooted in anarchy and subversion. These phenomena share certain stylistic and structural commonalities which make an intertextual reading a tantalising proposition for further research.

It is an imperative challenge that a model be found if and when such research progresses beyond an exploratory discourse such as this paper, and adequate cabaret texts should be available to facilitate such a reading.

A further possible research diversion could analyse the relationship between cabaret and the alternative press, as the underlying psyche and motivation for both the alternative press and cabaret show a great deal of commonality.

In a year where the Grahamstown Festival ran no fewer than thirty-three cabarets in its fringe festival alone, research would not only enrich our understanding of contemporary cabaret as a challenging if fluid medium, but an intertextual analysis would enrich journalistic understanding and surely add

a novel twist to journalism studies in general.

Knowledge and research of this kind is bound to lessen the fear and loathing of both cabaret and New Journalism often experienced by conservative and conventional researchers, and could add a rich dimension to the interdisciplinary study of communication in general.

To paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson, that eccentric exponent of New Journalism: when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro (Thompson, 1979:fly-leaf) – and do research.

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