

## The Narrator In Radio

**MY CHOICE** by Berit Hedemann

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I am given the honour and pleasure to choose a programme for us all to listen to, and to listen carefully, and I have chosen quite a new program: "*Die K - Szenen eines Drogenstrichs*", in English: "*K - Portrait of a drugs and prostitution scene*" by Jens Jarisch from Germany. Jens Jarisch is a relatively young man, 39 years of age, who started making documentaries eight years ago and has been awarded for more than one of them. This one here, "K", won the Prix Europa in 2005. For good reasons.

There are many reasons to choose this programme, but the main reason why this programme is important to *me* is because of the narrator in this piece. I think this is a masterpiece not only, but *mainly* because it uses the narrator in the way it does, and because of the relationship between the narrator and the documentary elements in the programme. The role of the narrator in radio interests me very much, and before we are going to listen to this whole piece, I want to share some thoughts with you about the possible roles of the narrator in radio, and give you some small examples to show my point. And I hope you will understand why when we end up in Jens Jarisch's programme, because it has all to do with that programme.

I often like to think of our work in radio as the work of the shaman. We are gathering our people around us and telling them stories, about the hunt, about the weather, the history of our people and about what is new. We work in an oral storytelling tradition, the tradition of Homer, the fairytale tellers and Bob Dylan. And this tradition is at least 40,000 years old, perhaps 200,000 years old. The love for oral storytelling has followed mankind as long as we have existed as mankind. It could be useful and a little mind expanding to think of it this way. What would the shaman do to make us listen? What would Homer have done? I specifically think of the role of the narrator in this way. All the possibilities of traditional oral narrators are at our disposal when we create a radio programme.

The most important the shaman has to do when he tells us something is to seduce us with his voice, with his way of speaking, with his words. I think this is the narrator's main obligation in radio too. Often we are a little too shy or perhaps too modest to do this. But then we are betraying the listener. The listener wants to be seduced, in one way or the other, if not, he stops listening.

Of course we can seduce a listener without a narrator. We can seduce with facts, with the main character, with the importance of the topic. A programme can be wonderful without a narrator. But often we need one, often because reality does not behave in the way we want it to. We often have other things on tape than we wanted to have, we have too much of something that turns out to be useless, and too little of the stuff we need – then we have got a problem, and we have to make a deed out of the necessity – and then the narrator is our best friend. He or she leads the listener by the hand through the story, and can do it in a seductive way: I don't see the narrator as a bad but sometimes necessary element in a programme, I see him or her as a million unused and unexplored possibilities.

And since the narrator in radio is invisible we are really free to choose every role for him or her in order to seduce. The narrator can be god, *deus ex machina*, he might be the devil, might be the earth, might be a rabbit. The narrator can be the big 'We', or the most personal 'I', he can be the inner voice of a cup of coffee, or a shouting sports commentator, or divided into two roles. And as the narrator often is the most clearly fictional part of a documentary, one can do the utmost out of the contrast between the narrator, as fiction, and the documentary parts. In this way, the narrator can enlighten the documentary parts, making them seem even more documentary.

Let me give you an example. In the programme "*A room is locked off*", which won the Prix Italia 2003, Kari Hesthamar is investigating the possibilities of a divided narrator. It is divided into two characters, one discussing with the other one what to do in the programme and how to get the main character to open up. As I said, the narrator has very often an important job to do in a programme, in addition to being seductive. Someone has to tell us who is talking, and where, and when, and how things look, essential facts, journalistic points. Like Kari Hesthamar did here, she is telling where this poet lives, what he is known for, what he looks like. The listeners start to expect something from him, but also get some expectations from the narrator herself, or from both the narrators, from their way of doing this. The listener wonders: why is it told like this, what are the narrators going to do in this programme?

Sound is a marvellous emotion-maker. What would nazism have been without the sound of the shouting of "*Heil Hitler*", what would crime stories have been without the sound of lonely steps in empty streets? But sounds are very often possible to interpret in different ways – the sound of a church bell for instance may signalise both a wedding (happiness) and a burial (sorrow), oppression by authority during hundreds of years, and danger, fire, war – which is shown in Leo Braun's programme "*Glocken in Europa*". What the sound of church bells signalise, what the listener feels, all that depends on the words around them. There are not many soundscapes rich enough in themselves to stand alone in a radio programme, they very often need a few words to make the emotional impact on the listener that we really want. With no words, sounds are often quickly reduced to unemotional soundscapes. But the narrator can give the sounds the help that is needed.

A very poetic narrator we hear in the programme "*Work of the devil*", which won the Prix Europa 2004, by Birger Amundsen. He is – with very few words – giving atmosphere and colour to the sounds and scenes, in addition to giving facts about the When and Where, and how it looks in a very minimalistic way. But implicitly the narrator is also telling us that this story will be told in a poetic way, with a poetic point of view, by a rhythmic and poetic narrator, that what we can expect from this programme is to be taken into this sort of mood.

One more detour before we come to "*Die K*". I newly learned, or discovered, a new word in English. The word is *serendipity*. Serendipity is on the list of the ten English words that are most difficult to translate. This word intrigues me. I know what it means – I think – but I cannot use it. It means something like '*being able to take advantage of the unexpected and turn it into something lucky for yourself*'. The word is made after a fairytale about three princes from Serendip, which is supposed to be Sri Lanka. They ride out into the world and behave in a special way. They experience a lot of things but act in a way so that everything turns out good for them. Serendipity is a mental ability to see which of the things that happen by chance are the important ones. It is a mental preparedness to see unexpected wonders.

It is not a talent, it is not something you can learn or something you can achieve, it's something more like a state of mind which you can get when you don't intend to get it. It is like the young King Saul in the *Old Testament* who went out to look for his father's donkeys, and while doing so, he ended up being the King of Israel. This is serendipity.

Or when you surf on the internet and have forgotten what you were searching for because you have found so many interesting things on your way. Then you have experienced serendipity. Or when Alexander Fleming discovered the penicillin: He had an accident in the laboratory, some mould fell down in a staphylococcus plate culture, and killed the bacteria. This discovery is an example of serendipity, it was unintended, but Fleming was clever enough to look into what happened. It is not enough to be careless with some mould to get the Nobel Prize, you have to be awake to get advantage out of the mishap, the accidental circumstance. It was serendipity.

People who are open to serendipity have usually more detours, are more inclined to trust intuition, and less stressed about achieving a goal. Nevertheless they often reach the goal more rapidly than others, and have more fun on the road, because they know how to get the most out of surprising luck. This I have read in the dictionary.

I suppose that you understand by now that I think this state of mind is useful to documentary makers. We go out into the world – and if our will is too strong, if our aim is too narrow, if our view is too focused – then we cannot find the beautiful things with our microphone because we don't notice them. The only thing we see is our goal. This ability to surrender to what is happening is indeed a very important thing for a documentary maker: not to force the reality into our concept of it. It could be useful for us to be open to serendipity when we make programmes. As Wim Van Grootloon was with the boxer and the coach in "*Sugar Jackson loopt verloren*". And as Jens Jarisch was, when he made the programme "K". He planned, he worked hard for a long time, but he was also extremely open to serendipity. Both are needed.

But perhaps – when we are making radio – there is more to serendipity than this. What about the listener? As a listener you deliberately expose yourself to something new and you don't know what it will lead you to in the end. In fact, as a listener, you are *by definition* open to serendipity. Because you are surrendering to an experience without fear. After all, it is not so dangerous to listen to a documentary. You could just go along with it, see what is happening – who cares? – and perhaps something good might happen.

This gives us as programme makers a fantastic possibility, a room to play in. The listener is following us with an open mind! He is more than usually open to the unexpected wonderful things that can happen and which are unforeseen. We can ask him to follow us wherever we want. He is open to radio pleasures.

The listener is like the hero in the story, without having to pay the price for it. For the listener it is like having a free ride on the boat of Theseus on his way to Crete, in the Greek myth. He can experience the Labyrinth and the Minotaur closely and come through the battle with some of the same understanding as the hero himself – but with no scars! And the listener is more open to serendipity than he is in his own life since it is less dangerous to go along on this radio trip, and because he doesn't *want* something else from it than just a radio experience, his *will* is not as hard, he is not as *eager*, but more open to the unexpected.

The medium radio is perfect for surprises: you have to surrender to what is happening in the programme because you cannot see what is coming, you *have to* go along with the narration and the narrator to understand anything at all. That too gives us many possibilities.

And perhaps, twelve years ago, I was into serendipity when I was working on a programme about the consultancy business, and how this business is changing society in an undemocratic way. It is called "*T.G.T. – The Great Transformation, A case for the boss and his management consultant*", and won the Prix Europa Yleisradio 1998.

I needed some music for a part of the narration in the programme and someone had forgotten a CD in the studio with songs of Elvis Presley. Then I had already invented a narrator for the programme, a narrator talking about a fictive woman, a waitress, who is the main character of the programme. She is observing all the consultants and the bosses in the programme from her point of view, and the narrator is referring to her as '*she*'. But at the same time the narrator is *being* also the '*she*', in a way. And this '*she*' sometimes bursts out into fantasies about how she sees society and the future. And the music of Elvis Presley turned out to support her as a fictional part in between the documentary parts. One more example of somewhat experimental and seductive narrators. There are millions of others.

In the programme "*K – Portrait of a drugs and prostitution scene*" Jens Jarisch uses the narrator in a really free and unexpected way. In one and the same programme he uses a narrator in all the ways I have spoken about until now and in many more. In one programme! And he gets away with it!

But let me first talk a little about the other elements in this programme, which is about and named after a street in Berlin called 'Die K'. The programme consists of numerous really spectacular documentary scenes, like Manuela giving sex to Norbert in his car, a very young prostitute putting on makeup in her apartment, a policeman stumbling upon used syringes and condoms in a public car park, two fourteen year old girls talking together about a really horrible abortion one of them had undergone. The scenes are all very well recorded, and the sound is clear and bright. Jens Jarisch must have worked really hard for these scenes, and as I learned from Neil Sandell, *Luck favours the prepared mind*. Jens Jarisch has collected the scenes with a sense for the unforeseen, and edited them into the programme with a sense for the unspeakable quality of some small details, in words, in situations, in atmosphere. These scenes give colourful pictures of the hard life on K-street. There is no main character, we meet really many persons in this programme, but some of the stories are going through the whole of the programme, as the story about Manuela and Norbert in the car.

The scenes are also woven together in a playful and intelligent way. Very often a new scene, or person, is introduced before the current scene has come to an end. This is giving the listener continuously small surprises, radio pleasures. We are driven forward by the power of constant interest, by surprises, by our curiosity: What will I experience here in this *street*? But also: what will I experience here in this *programme*? Many surprising things apparently can happen, and as a listener I am invited to meet the reality in the programme open to serendipity. I am the open, fearless hero travelling in this world which is unknown to me, open to everything that happens, taking the best out of it.

But most of all I think this programme is a masterpiece because of the narrator. Without the narrator the programme would have been much more ordinary. Here she is, a clearly fictionalised narrator. She is using every trick in the book to seduce us. She has both a poetic rhythmic language and a very factual language. She tells us about *who* and *where* and *when*. She is painting the scenes for us with the necessary words. Speaking to Jens Jarisch himself, he has stressed the importance of the spoken word, how it gives light and colour to the sounds and vice versa, and he really makes the most out of it with this narrator.

But the narrator here is doing more than that. She is a character in herself, the main character in the programme. Who is she?

I don't know. And that intrigues me. She is outside and inside the programme at the same time, knowing everything that has happened in the past and what will happen in the future, telling us what the protagonists in the programme still don't know: *"Your friend Kessi – who, however, will only remain your friend for a few more days – calls to you from out of the bathroom."* And when a girl, Lisa, is worried about that nobody must know what she is doing with boys and drugs the narrator says comfortingly: *"Nobody does know"*.

She also tells us sometimes what the persons in the programme think (mostly that is strictly forbidden in radio documentaries!). In that way she is omniscient, the all-knowing narrator, quite close to god. She is talking to the real persons in the programme, shouting to them to get them to wake up: *"Sandra! Sandra!"* And she is helping them when they don't find their words, like when a policeman is looking for the term for what is happening when someone is holding a lighter under aluminium to get the drug to boil, and she is whispering to him the word he looks for: *"heated"* – and he grasps the word from her and repeats *"heated"*. Extremely playfully done. It seems like serendipity, like Jens Jarisch got the idea because he was open to serendipity, and had made himself available to it.

But his narrator is also delivering straight info: *"Hannelore has been watching out of the window of her mattress shop for over twenty years now."* And beyond that she is also reflecting upon this reality, asking questions, even being sorry for what is happening, being ironic, being angry, judging some of the protagonists a little, questioning the persons in the programme.

She is addressing some of the persons in the programme by the word *"you"*, thus establishing a closeness to them, while she talks about others as a *"him"* or a *"her"*. It seems like she says *"you"* only to the girls in the programme, though not to all of them, and only when she has sympathy for them. She is changing perspective from the sympathetic *"you"* to the critical and sometimes ironic *"she"* or *"he"*. But it's not *always* like that. We were making a Norwegian version of *"K"* and got of course into an extremely deep analysis of the narrator and her position then. And we said to each other: This narrator is not consistent. She changes. She uses every trick in the book, but there isn't a consistent system behind it. Nevertheless it works.

It works so well. Why?

I think it is because we are being seduced, and it is very nice to be seduced, as you know. We are being seduced by the character of the narrator. How does she come to life? The narrator here has a very characteristic voice, she's quite hoarse, that is an important part of our picture of her, her character seems quite like some of the prostitutes in the programme. She is bringing the scenes forward, approaching the protagonists in the programme with some kind of *love*, giving them more than they have alone. She is taking us listeners by the hand and guiding us through this hard part of reality, so that we can stand to be there, because she is together with us. And the female singer of the music used in the programme (Emiliana Torrini) has the same character in her voice, and that is really seductive, that gives the whole programme this atmosphere of having a female look upon the things that are shown to us – not a romantic look – a very sober and a little cynical female look.

This female goddess is used to the dirt on earth.

She is our lone heroine in this documentary, going into this difficult world open to whatever will happen there, open to serendipity. And we as listeners are invited to join her. Perhaps we could think of ourselves as the lucky princes of Serendip, being able to ride into this world of filthy dope and sex without really being in danger, but open to new insights.

Luck favours the prepared mind.

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