

Interview with professor PhD. John S. Bak

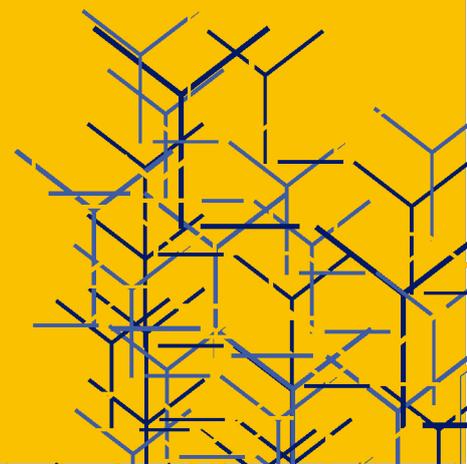
John S. Bak, PhD, is an American researcher and author, having written scientific studies that focus on the Theory of Communication, American Literature and Theatre, World Literary Journalism and Autobiographism. With degrees for the Universities of Illinois, Ball State and the Sorbonne, and visiting senior fellowships from Harvard, Columbia, Texas, and Oxford, he has been a professor for more than 20 years at the University of Lorraine in Nancy, France. In addition to being an expert on the American playwright Tennessee Williams, he is Founding President of the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies (IALIS) and currently Principal Investigator of the project ReportAGES, about Literary Journalism and War. Throughout the Brazilian Winter of 2017, Bak was in Brazil, thanks to a grant offered by the General Consulate of France that is collaborating with the State University of São Paulo (Unesp). On September 27th, he returned to the country, this time to the University of Sorocaba (Uniso), as the keynote speaker of the Graduate Program on Communication and Culture's 1st International Meeting of Researchers in Communication and Culture. The following interview took place just after he delivered his talk on Trench Journals and Brazilian culture and its Literary Journalism legacy.

This interview was conducted by undergraduate students Ana Letícia Rocha, Bruna Emy Camargo, Eduardo Lira e Vinícius Figueiredo and Master's candidate Leila Gapy, under the supervision of Professor Monica Martinez (Uniso)

Bruna Emy Camargo is a student in the undergraduate Journalism Program at the University of Sorocaba and a scholarship holder for scientific initiation (Probic) with the project "Poetical Representations of the Death in Media Narratives: the soap opera Velho Chico," directed by professor Míriam Cristina Carlos Silva.

Leila Gapy is a journalist at Uniso, specializing in Literary Journalism for FAVI/ABJL, and a Master's student scholarship holder with CAPES of the Graduate Program in Communication and Culture (PPGCC-Uniso).

Monica Martinez is a doctor in Communication Sciences, a professor of the Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at the University of Sorocaba (PPGCC-Uniso), director of the Media Narratives Research Group (Nami), and researcher on transnational media narratives studies.



Triade: You've been in Brazil for almost two months, between July and August. What do you think about Brazilians and the country?

John S. Bak: I've had a great time. It was a pleasure meeting students because teaching in France and in Europe is much different than here. The relationship between the students and their teachers is very formal there. And it's a nice experience to be able to interact and have a close relationship with students here. I will miss that when I go back to France where I don't have that. In terms of a cultural exchange, people, in general, have been very warm and very friendly here. It's a pleasure, and it reminds me of my American origins because you can go to America and find people who will talk to you in the street.

Triade: What differences between Brazil and Europe drew your attention the most?

JSB: Probably the biggest difference is driving, the rules of road to respect, the paved roads, and the dirt roads. The American in me loves to drive and to get around by car, so I had to adjust to that here using Waze and Google, and I didn't always recognize the directions I was supposed to take. [Laughs] So, the biggest cultural difference, I think, is that and also getting used to helping people move around the city, be it in Bauru, in Rio de Janeiro, in Santos, or in São Paulo. It took me some time to adjust to that. But in terms of culture, what is actually fairly similar in many ways, at least between France and Brazil, is our food and eating habits, and our relationships with our colleagues.

3) You came to teach a Literary Journalism course at Unesp. Did you figure out something different about studying Literary Journalism in Brazil?

JSB: Yes, I definitely did. I taught the class, at Unesp, in a much different way than I would have ever taught it in France, and I could not have known that until I arrived. The students are so different here, in terms of the relationships I spoke about earlier, and because of that, I had to find a more interactive way to teach them. In France, it is very hierarchical: the teacher represents knowledge, and students simply take notes. There is little class discussion. Here, it's interactive, and I prefer that approach, so I tried to come up with more exercises, in class, that would get students involved with each other, argue and debate various issues of Literary Journalism. It was an absolute pleasure! It was really exciting to push myself, to rethink my pedagogy and teaching, which I had not really done these past twenty years.

Triade: In your book *Literary Journalism Across the Globe* (University of Massachusetts, 2011), you say that the debate about Literary Journalism's merits has ended since it already has the repertoire to be considered as a discipline. Concretely, how do you see Literary Journalism as a discipline? For this, don't we need to list the similarities of its development around the world?

JSB: That's a good question. It would be difficult to start creating Literary Journalism as a discipline. It has to develop by itself. I don't think we can impose its development as such.

We've tried in America to start developing diplomas that are specific to Literary Journalism, but it's still quite rare. What I mean by that is when you enroll at university, you enroll in taking a degree in Literary Journalism Studies, as opposed to a degree in Communication or Journalism, of which Literary Journalism might be a subtopic. But for that to happen, we would need to establish not only a clear theory behind Literary Journalism, but also a corpus of Literary Journalism works, as well as a notion of ethics in terms of studying and practicing the form of Literary Journalism, which are two separate issues. I am not a practitioner; I'm more a scholar, so my approach to Literary Journalism would be much different. Take Literature, for instance. I studied Literature when I was in college – the study of Literature, not the writing of Literature. And those are two entirely different disciplines. If I'm going to become a writer, I would go to an Academy of Fine Arts or the discipline that deals more with creative work. I think for Literary Journalism, we need to create two disciplines, and I think we've started doing that already. I know that Mark Kramer at Harvard and Robert Boynton at New York University have been at the fore of promoting a practitioners' discipline, but we need a scholars' disciplinary field as well. The main problem to achieving these aims is that each country has different pedagogical traditions, beliefs and programs, and I don't know where it is going to start and how it is going to spread, but that will eventually be up to your generation to consider and accomplish.

Triade: If each nation was to develop a singular Literary Journalism, thanks to its history and culture, how could we say that what they are developing is Literary Journalism?

JSB: That's a very good question. I never ask my students if they're reading "literature" when we study a Tennessee Williams plays. It is assumed that it is literature from the start. I think that we need to arrive at a certain point where we don't have to determine if a given text is or is not Literary Journalism, but arrive at a point where the question is moot and there is an implicit acceptance among all nations as to what defines Literary Journalism. So whatever Brazilians finally decide amongst themselves what their Literary Journalism is, it is my duty, as a French man or as an American, to accept your definition. I believe definitions need to begin from the ground and work its way up. I don't think that Europeans can impose certain rules on what Literary Journalism is or is not and force Brazilian scholars or practitioners to abide by those rules; it's for you to establish what *Jornalismo Literário* is for you and open that explanation up to us outside of Brazil.

Triade: What do you think is still missing to create a conception of what is international Literary Journalism? Wouldn't that help later studies in general to focus on their singularities?

JSB: I think the biggest obstacle to accepting a uniform international Literary Journalism is the lack of communication between nations. And the fact that we are here, today, I, as an American with French nationality talking to Brazilian students, is a start. That's the way it

needs to be done: more international exchanges such as this one. I need Brazilian students to come to France and study with me, just as I need my French students to come to Brazil and integrate into your program. Only then can we break down these academic communication barriers. We already have enough barriers that stand between us and our nations – politics, cultures, race – but if we can at least try to break down the academic barriers and encourage these types of exchanges, we will have already won. I have learned so much about Brazilian Literary Journalism just in the past couple of months that I'm passionate about learning more. But a year ago, before I was granted the Franco-Brazilian Chair of Journalism Studies, I didn't think about Brazilian Literary Journalism. And I think it is precisely through these cultural exchanges, physical cultural exchanges, that such changes in peoples' attitudes can begin to take shape. You need to come to France; I need to come to Brazil to experience it. You cannot do it from Skype, and you cannot do it from a book. And I would really encourage governments to help fund these exchanges more for students and for professors to facilitate their exchange programs.

Triade: You say Literary Journalism often raises our political consciousness, changes our way of thinking, broadens our knowledge and promotes critical thinking. Can we say that Literary Journalism has a social and educational function? If you agree with these functions, wouldn't Literary Journalism be an enemy of the state? Or even elitist, since critical thinking is not developed in basic education or at least not here in Brazil?

JSB: That's a very good question. It's not by chance that during the Eastern European revolutions some of the first people who were killed or imprisoned were artists and dramatists. When I taught in the Czech Republic, President Václav Havel had been imprisoned because he was a playwright. He escaped execution, but he was imprisoned because all of his works, to a certain extent, were critical of the Soviet system that controlled his country. Dating back to Antiquity, that has always been, and will always remain, a truth. Artists, and by extension the academics who study and promote them, are a threat to totalitarian states. What we need is to educate people about this truth, because governments are not going to change their attitude towards the arts and its criticism of their politics. There will always be right-wing governments that will produce dictators and that's what we see around the world still today, even in the 21st century. And I think the role of art in general, I will get to Literary Journalism in a second, is to provide a voice for the people to challenge political ideologies. Now, a Literary Journalist is potentially as dangerous as a novelist, or a playwright, or a journalist. The number of journalists killed throughout the world for their ideas is astounding and frightening. If you're going to be a Literary Journalist, you're going to engage in serious work and stories about these types of issues; not all literary journalists are politically motivated, of course, and there are some who deal more with social issues as opposed to political one. But if you do, then, yes, you are putting yourself in danger. That is the reality, I think, of being a journalist in anything. And

literary journalism perhaps is more susceptible to danger because you're going to get more to the heart of the story. Consider the case of Russian literary journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was assassinated for her criticism of the Putin regime during the Second Chechen War. Will governments change? Will they change their perspective towards journalists and those who expose corruption and expose the evils of society and government? No, governments will not change. Can we persuade people to support Literary Journalism as a voice to combat corruption and evil? Yes. But that will come with time, and with considerable cost, when literary journalists refuse to back down and deny or silence their beliefs and ideologies.

Triade: You also say that the current Literary Journalism is ready to revolutionize our way of reading and appreciating literature. Weren't you referring to reality? But why has it not been revolutionized yet?

JSB: You need to understand that I'm a scholar of literature more than I'm a scholar of journalism or *actualité*, as the French call it, or the things that take place in our world today. So, my bias is literary when I read literature, when I read Literary Journalism and when I teach it. I do obviously side with the literary aspects of Literary Journalism, so perhaps when I said that in my introduction, it was the literary scholar coming out more so than the journalist scholar. But it's true. Literary Journalism can influence both, and I think in the long- and short-term. Literary Journalism can help us learn, for instance, to read literature differently by establishing a literature of fact and truth that certain countries, such as Finland and China, value more than fiction. It's a truthful story that is told in an artful way. In terms of how we understand realities, yes, definitely, I may not have said that, but I believe it. And Literary Journalism allows us to expose a story's underbelly more than traditional journalism can. It will certainly allow us to do that but only if A) we have a public that is willing to read longer stories and that is the biggest question right now, and B) we accept that these longer stories actually change their attitudes towards the world around them. Long-form journalism takes a long time to read, and we have to trust in a readership that is willing to put down the newspaper and turn off the television and sit down with a ten, twenty or thirty thousand word article on a Kindle or an Ipad, and that's not going to be easy to do. They do it with literature already, but they do it with literature because it is a pleasure for them to read, or a passion. For Literary Journalism, which is as educational or insightful as it is artful, we hope they will be willing to plunge into a long-form piece, since it will widen their point of view on a given topic. But for that, we need readers. I think that is our biggest and greatest challenge for the future: to convince readers to accept long-form and then to convince publishers that these forms of literature and Literary Journalism are needed.

Triade: You say that somehow Literary Journalism developed in many places that have been committed to informing the world, accurately and honestly, about the magic in the mundane, the great and the small, and we in them. What do you mean by magic in the mundane?

JSB: The magic in the mundane is taking something that we discard, or overlook, and examining it closely to reveal its importance, its extraordinariness, to society. That, it seems to me, is the basic goal of all Literary Journalism. Most literary journalist's stories, at least those I have read in English, tend to be about commonplace people or commonplace situations and making them seem extraordinary. It's too easy to take something that is already extraordinary and talk about it. The object or a person that is extraordinary often talks and presents itself because of its extraordinariness. And it is our job to find the magic in these small details of life where we don't necessarily focus such the person's life who sweeps the streets and the janitor's life who is working in hospitals. We have to admit that their lives contain so much important aspects of our daily life.

Unfortunately, your generation is more influenced than mine by the image as meaning and the speed through which it reaches us – be it through your smart phones and social media, through YouTube videos, or through selfies. But a selfie is not the mundane for you; a selfie is a way for you to capture and preserve historical moments in time, just as Literary Journalism does. As such, selfie culture is slowly killing Literary Journalism because, in also celebrating the mundane as extraordinary, but on a scale vastly superior to the number of literary journalistic stories being produced, the selfie is effectively drawing the extraordinary down to the level of the mundane more than raising the mundane to the level of the extraordinary. The extraordinary will eventually oversaturate the world of the mundane, making any literary journalistic attempt to celebrate the mundane as common as a selfie on Instagram.

Triade: You say that facts and truths are the luxuries of democracies, or that is at least what we were led to believe. Then, you say that there are half-truths. Given the fineness of the line separating the two, is this not Literary Journalism's Achilles' Heel?

JSB: Remember that I wrote this introduction before Donald Trump was elected President of the United States and before “fake news” became a reality. We've always had fake news, of course, but it was never distributed to people through media that was not considered journalistic, such as Facebook or Buzzfeeds, etc., nor that it came from sources, such as the White House, which we have traditionally accepted as truth, or at least as mostly truth or slanted truth, but generally not a bald-faced lie, and certainly not a lie on the scale that we are seeing coming daily from the Trump administration today. Moreover, there has always been a sense that the reader understood what was “fake” in the news, or at least politically biased; they may have believed what they read to be true, and if they did not, they had the option to turn to other traditional news sources for clarification. That is no longer the case, not even in democracies like the United States. So, when I wrote that, the idea was that even in democracies, we have facts and truths, and they are not intended to be mutually exclusive. If I had to rewrite this today, I would probably strip that excerpt from the introduction. I was saddened by the U.S. presidential election, not just because of who Donald Trump is, but how he was elected – and continues to find support among a certain American voting base. If I didn't agree with a candidate's politics

but still felt he was a good candidate and rightly elected, I would still not accept the fact that he or she was elected through ways that I don't think are necessarily democratic. I think of your generation, because this is not a one-time issue, and we're going to find this more and more; we found it to some extent in Brexit. Consider the fact that Google has said the most researched term *after* the Brexit vote was "What is the European Union?" – the single point around which the whole Brexit vote revolved. Democracies need to be educated in order to understand the differences between facts, and truths, and opinions. And unfortunately, I think we're becoming lazy democracies, allowing ourselves to be influenced by external sources (such as the Russian internet trolls spreading fake news before the U.S. elections) that we assume are in our best interests, are truthful or honest; we are not interrogating them enough. I've always told my students, no matter what piece of fiction, discourse or speech I'm teaching at that time, what's most important to you is not to listen to me and to what I have to say about this piece, but rather to interrogate it for yourself, to understand it for yourself, and to question it for yourself. Because if you don't do that, then you're not living up to the one basic tenet or requirement of democracy, and it's a shame that "fake" news is more a reality today than "factographic" news. And yet, what is most shameful is that my nation's own President is the main source of promoting such standards.

Triade: Wouldn't it be "creativity," and precisely this culture of half-truths, that would allow for a free Literary Journalism? Would Literary Journalism be the freest of all journalistic practices?

JSB: In an ideal world, sure. But we're not in an ideal world. When I went to Unesp and taught my class, I gave my students an interesting task. I divided them into groups and gave them a list of about thirty legitimate traits of what defines Literary Journalism. I asked them to select five of those traits which they felt to be the most important aspect of Literary Journalism today, be it in Brazil, or anywhere. And one of them was, of course, that "the story should be 100% factual." To my surprise, none of the students chose that as an important aspect of Literary Journalism. The one item that all of them chose (and bear in mind that each list was essentially different, which is either a problem to or a benefit of Literary Journalism) was that "a literary journalist ought to approach his or her story without prejudice." And I agree, but to discover that this item to them was more important than what I thought was literary journalism's most important trait opened up my eyes considerably. Was I to understand that, at least to my Brazilian students, half truths were acceptable in Literary Journalism? That is certainly possible, and it may be the case in Brazil that its *Jornalismo Literário* has some creative elements in it. That's fine, and that's for you Brazilians to decide and to convince us, the outsiders, that your Literary Journalism is still factual and truthful, even if it's filled with some creative elements. You're simply trying to get to some great truth; and if the notion of what constitutes the truth and half-truth enters that equation, so be it. I've studied Tennessee Williams a lot, and he often filled his own non-fiction and autobiographical writings with half-

truths, but he was a constant defender of “poetic truth,” the idea that reality is more accessible through half-truth than through truth itself and, if what is finally achieved is more honest than honesty itself, more universal in its applicability to peoples’ realities, then where is the harm in exaggerating? And I think that is what’s Literary Journalism is going to have to deal with, to explore over the next century.

Triade: In today’s lecture, you spoke about Literary Journalism and war. It’s quite an impressive story. Do conflicts such as these promote a bonding with the reader? Are people so moved that they begin empathizing with those in the text? Does Literary Journalism create this bond?

JSB: A boundary can protect as much as a boundary can keep out. Donald Trump’s wall is an example of that. The problem with empathy, taking Literary War Journalism as an example, is that the writer needs to universalize, to make the object (or the abject) the subject, to turn the other into the self. And yet, in the case of two or three American writers who used Literary Journalism to write about war, in their stories, they tend to focus on the American perspective only, because that is what a lot of American readers want, especially stories about its soldiers’ acts of heroism. So, yes, to a certain extent, writing for an American audience is trying to inform them about the lives of their soldiers, and that is what trench journals were doing at the beginning of the 20th century, just as imbedded literary journalists like Sebastian Junger are doing today. But what happens when the book reaches the global market? Literature, especially the classics, is not meant to necessarily praise or inform people about themselves, and that’s what we appreciate reading foreign literature – we can see ourselves in the story’s protagonist, even if we do not speak the same language or pray to the same god, etc. When we’re reading foreign literary journalism, however, be it Mark Bowden or Junger or whomever, who are essentially writing to American audiences about American experiences in Somalia or Afghanistan, we have to try not to focus only on the one category of readers. And I think that’s one of the problems with Literary War Journalism that I’ve come across. In order to empathize, as you say, a reader has to look beyond the writer’s own writing and try to understand it on their own terms. And that’s going to be a challenge with Literary War Journalism, for we have to try and write literary war journalism that all nations, and not just one particular nation, can appreciate. I think John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* or Svetlana Alexievich’s *Boys in Zinc* achieve that.

Triade: Do you know that the actual situation in Brazil has made a lot of public agencies open up and talk about Literary Journalism? This includes *Amazônia Real*. These agencies have become popular and make money off of Literary Journalism. What are your thoughts on that?

JSB: Well, we need to understand that Literary Journalism is also about making money. A writer is not going to eat grass and drink water all of his life. I mean, you become an author firstly because, yes, you might have a passion to reveal a story, but there’s a need for a career,

and I have never met any literary journalist who wasn't also aware that the story he was writing may or may not be lucrative. One of the dangers that I have come across today is that literary journalists are choosing stories because they could be potential scripts for Hollywood, and that's an ethical question. Are they writing the story because it is close to their heart or are they writing the story because they can sign a six-figure digit contract with Paramount Pictures? Having said that, the fact that everyone could eventually jump on the literary journalism bandwagon, as we say, it not necessary a bad thing. And if indeed *Amazônia Real* is using Literary Journalisms' fame in Brazil right now to promote itself or to promote certain stories, I find that a good thing. That means Literary Journalism is powerful. And what we need to do is to educate people to realize and understand the difference between Literary Journalism that is heart-wrenching and piercing to some points, and Literary Journalism that is just trying to use the label to sell itself and make money. But ultimately, I think, as T. S. Eliot once said, bad artists, you know, they just sort of copy other art whereas really good artists simply steal and claim it as their own. And the fact that somebody wants to imitate you must mean you've come a long way and that you've made a mark. It needs to be controlled, of course, but I think that as long as we can keep promoting what Literary Journalism is, just the way that cheap novels were produced – they never dethroned literature, and I think readers grew up recognizing that a romance novel is not going to be a classic novel studied in a literature class, so they can co-exist – why can't we have two literary journalisms as well? Those that we read for sensationalized stories will eventually become ephemeral and disappear with time, as most romance novels did, and accept the fact that pure Literary Journalism, hardcore Literary Journalism and good Literary Journalism, will last in the same way that good literature has endured.

Triade: Thank you so much, professor. We would appreciate any final thoughts you might have to conclude this interview.

JSB: It has been an absolute pleasure, as I said, all the way around. The fact that I'm here in a recording studio of a radio station on a Brazilian campus with students is phenomenal. It would just not happen in Europe. Your passion has brought back my passion as a teacher, which I've lost probably for the last twenty years. I think I was once a very passionate teacher, and I sort of reduced myself to an educator or a entirely a scholar who must teach to pay for his research. And now, finding this passion again has really been beneficial for me, and I hope when I go back to France that it will stay with me, knowing full well that I will not have the same students there, as I do here or had here. But it has been a great experience to help me become a better teacher, so I thank you.