

# THE TET OFFENSIVE AND THE BATTLE OF KHE SANH AS WATERSHED OF THE VIETNAM WAR

**Michael Herr's *Dispatches***

A OFENSIVA TET E A BATALHA DE KHE SAHN COMO DIVISOR DE  
ÁGUAS DA GUERRA DO VIETNÃ: *DISPATCHES*, DE MICHAEL HERR

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## ABSTRACT

The literature of war, independently of genre, tends to record the causes of the conflict, which are generally political and economic. But, it also tends to appoint a kind of aesthetics of reception, in other words, how the conflict is felt and registered by the experiences of the individual, whether soldier, writer, journalist or common reader. In *Dispatches*, the fantasies of the grunts, the allusions to the theory of dominoes, the necessity to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, and the role of the press are condensed in this remarkable non-fictional narrative.

## KEYWORDS

Vietnam, grunt, battle

That was Johnson's Dien Bien Phu.  
The Marine heroism there was awesome.  
Sgt. Carter Kirk

The importance of the Battle of Khe Sanh overcomes its title, for the singular form just joins the great amount of battles it represents. However, it is important to stress that from the Tet Offensive, in the first quarter of 1968, onwards, the Vietnam War was not the same, since the number of harsh fights started diminishing and no other battle equals in meaning that of Khe Sanh, a conclusion based on the countless artistic pursuits which had this battle as their material or content.

After the guns had been silenced, the Battle of Khe Sanh carried on in the field of propaganda as both sides claimed victory in the battlefield. Despite the protests this

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battle engendered in the United States and elsewhere, a lot of poems, songs, movies, debates and other historical and literary productions were created, providing this event with an epic flavor. Among these works, there is a non-fiction narrative, released in 1977, *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr, a work which blends reportage, as Herr was a journalist, with literary techniques, whose result is one of the most brilliant and important chronicles of the literature of the Vietnam War.

*Dispatches* is, in fact, a very difficult work to be labeled. Some critics tend to categorize it as a New Journalistic narrative given the fact that its chapters were written following the model of scene-by-scene construction and having a journalist as witness. Some other characteristics normally linked to that journalistic and literary genre are also present such as full dialogue recording and third-person point of view. The anthropological objects of study like customs, daily habits, gestures and manners are also recognized as New Journalism's devices portrayed in Herr's work.

On the other hand, *Dispatches* also presents some features which allow it to be read as a postmodern narrative, considering that self-reflexivity, intertexts, and the mixture of fact with fictional modes of expression can be apprehended in its lines. I prefer therefore to read *Dispatches* as a hybrid work, which brings all the features mentioned and others as well. Like other narratives of war, such as Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, *Dispatches* is a collection of material produced apart and published separately elsewhere, in this case, in the *Esquire*, *New York Review* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. The reportages were compiled and revised afterwards in order to form the content of the work.

Starting with the characteristics which allow *Dispatches* to be seen as a New Journalism's work, a scene-by-scene construction is an evident strategy in all chapters of the book. As each chapter was written and published separately, each one can be seen as a frame apart. Perhaps the chapter "Khe Sanh" can be categorized as an amalgam of scenes due to the variety of episodes that took place during the siege of the village of Khe Sanh.

What characterizes a scene is a portrait that neither changes nor moves in time. The opening of the first chapter, "Breathing In", is a typical example of a scene which could, even, be the first take of a movie, given the plastic description of the map on the wall of Herr's apartment in Saigon. The configuration, the origin and the allusions the map supplies transferred and guided Herr to the realm of imagination. In Herr's own words:

There was a map of Vietnam on the wall  
of my apartment in Saigon and some nights,  
coming back late to the city, I'd lie out on  
my bed and looked at it, too tired to do  
anything more than just get my boots off.  
That map was a marvel especially now that  
it wasn't real anymore. (1991, p. 3)

The scene shows the map as a sign displaying how nations are artificial and discursive constructions based on ethnicity, language and geography. Another sign of such artificiality lies in the fact that the map underlines the traditional division of Vietnam into Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, a division that did not take the will of the Vietnamese people into account and which was undertaken by the colonial forces

that dominated the country from the beginning of its history until the final victory of the NVA and Viet Cong in 1975.

*Dispatches* has two main settings: Khe Sanh and the old cultural capital of Vietnam, Hue. The chapter “Hell Sucks” narrates the battle for Hue and when it was at its end. The scene described by the narrator provides us with one detail after the other as if they had happened in a sequence. Herr says:

But by then the battle for Hue was almost over. The Cav was working the northwest corner of the Citadel, and elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> had come in through what had formerly been an NVA re-supply route... When they'd first come into Hue the NVA had sat at banquets given for them by the people. Before they left, they'd skimmed all the edible vegetation from the surface of the moat. Seventy percent of Vietnam's one lovely city was destroyed, and if the landscape seemed desolate, imagine how the figures in that landscape looked. (p. 83)

When we interpret the scene above, it seems clear that it addresses the fact that the Tet Offensive was failing militarily. But, it must be said that the fail of the communists during the Tet was taken as a pyrrhic victory for the Americans and their allies, a fact that changed public opinion in the United States once and for all, and whose consequence was the beginning of the American withdrawal and its future political and moral defeat in Vietnam.

In the aesthetics of the genre New Journalism, the full dialogue recording is another important characteristic. Nevertheless, the approach of this item leads me to widen the scope to include the language used in the dialogues. First of all, Herr used the language of the grunts which, in turn, was shaped by 1960s American slang blended with local dialects of the soldier's origin. The chapter dedicated to the Battle of Khe Sanh shows that, during an interval of the combats, the grunts had a moment of relaxation. Then, Day Tripper and Mayhew seized the opportunity to talk and listen to the radio, which was one of the few kinds of entertainment they had. After listening to the song, whose lyric depicts the context that fits the soldiers' reality in Vietnam, the two soldiers carried on talking. They say:

“Know what I heard over at the Captain's hootch?”  
Mayhew said. “Some kid tol' me the Cav's comin' in here.”  
“Right,” someone said. “They're coming tomorrow.”  
“What time tomorrow?”  
“All right,” Mayhew said. “Don't believe me. This kid was a clerk. He's over to the TOC yesterday and he heard 'em talking.”  
“What's the Cav gonna do here? Make this a fuckin' parking lot for helicopters?” (p. 138-139)

The full dialogue of the grunts typifies their own dialect as shown by the apocope in “tol” for *told* and “comin” for *coming* and the apheresis in “em” for *them*. Given the flexibility of the language spoken by the men, in the following passage, from the chapter “Illumination Rounds”, the features of the psychological character and physical appearance of a helicopter gunner are shown:

“You guys ought do a story on me suntahm”,  
the kid said. He was a helicopter gunner,  
six-three with an enormous head that...  
He was from Kilgore, Texas, and he was on his  
seventeenth consecutive month in-country.  
“Why should we do a story about you?”  
“‘Cause I’m so fuckin’ good”, he said, “‘n’  
thatain’ no shit, neither. Got me one hunnert  
‘n’ fiftyse’en gooks kilt. ‘N’ fifty caribou.”  
He grinned and stanchd the saliva for a  
second. “Them’re all certified,” he added. (p. 179)

It is relevant to observe that the analysis of discourse of a soldier who is in the exact moment of his duty reveals both the psychology of the individual and of the war itself. The helicopter gunner exhibits through his actions and discourse how proud he was for fighting for his country, the U.S.A.; in no time does he demonstrate guilty feeling or compassion for his country’s enemies; on the contrary, he felt more self-conscious of his job.

The third characteristic of New Journalism to be seen in *Dispatches* is the usage of the third-person point of view. It is possible to see this narrative strategy throughout *Dispatches*, in the descriptions of physical or psychological profile of the soldiers, as the one about the helicopter gunner, on page 179 above, or when the narrator argues about a political or military authority and his decisions. Given this, Herr tells us how General Westmoreland, in one of his trips back to the United States, requested the sending of more troops to Vietnam, using the argument that soon would have been understood as bragging by the U.S. Commander.

By the time that Westmoreland came home that fall to cheerlead and request-beg another quarter of a million men, with his light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel collateral, there were people leaning so far out to hear good news that a lot of them slipped over the edge and said that they could see it too. (p. 47)

The third-person was used here not only to show General’s request, but many people who were watching the war on T.V. in America were ready to believe that “there was light at the end of the tunnel”. This technique, however, is largely used in the chapter called “Colleagues”, especially when the narrator comments the return of the photographer Tim Page to the front. Herr spends a few paragraphs to present the peculiarities of Page’s personality and his work. Tim Page was such a special character for Herr and his colleagues that his origin, psychological profile, his condition as photographer and how he managed his friendship with other journalists are pictured in detail.

It is exactly the habits of Tim Page that can provide support for the fourth characteristic of New Journalism here. As a photographer, he exhibits courage and boldness similar to the ones of the best soldiers if we take into consideration that he was the only one who would go for a photograph where no one else would. It is the narrator himself who recognizes Page’s courage and describes it in the narrative, as it is depicted in the passage below:

He was an orphan boy from London, married at seventeen and divorced a year later. He worked his way across Europe as a cook in the hotels, drifting east through India, through Laos (where he claims to have dealt with the Spooks, a little teen-age espionage), into

Vietnam at the age of twenty. One of the things that everybody said about him was that he had not been much of a photographer then (he'd picked up a camera the way you or I would pick a ticket), but that he would go places for pictures that very few other photographers were going. People made him sound crazy and ambitious, like the Sixties Kid, a stone-cold freak in a country where the madness raced up the hills and into the jungles, where everything essential to learning Asia, war, drugs, the whole adventure, was close at hand. (p. 236)

From the features of New Journalism to other Postmodern references of *Dispatches*, it is relevant to point out that some characteristics referred to by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* pop up in Herr's narrative. As was stressed in the beginning of this essay, self-reflexivity, intertext, a blend of genres and irony are inserted in the core of *Dispatches*. Until then, journalism was regarded as a minor literary genre. However, since the 1960s, with the review of the canons in the humanistic areas, a new status for it has been proposed. Michael Herr, in using literary techniques blended with journalistic reportage to cover and write on a historical event, the Vietnam War, gave his contribution to a better estimation of journalism as a literary genre. *Dispatches* subverts the logic or the old apothegm that the truth about the historical events could only be found out in historiography and its forms of records.

In doing so, Herr sets up the first historiographic metafictional feature of *Dispatches*. The narrative unity seems rather feeble considering that the work is an amalgam of texts made up of independent chapters and published apart before being compiled to form a non-fictional work. But Herr, in providing *Dispatches* with an alternative structure, especially in language and style, turns his text into a criticism of the conventional journalistic narratives of war. It is Herr who argues: "I never knew a member of the Vietnam press corps who was insensible to what happened when the words 'war' and 'correspondent' got joined".<sup>1</sup>

The self-reflexivity of Herr's text continues when he draws our attention to the manner through which the journalists, who were covering the Vietnam War, coped with issues of that conflict "fantasizing privately about other, older wars, Wars I and II, air wars and island wars, obscure colonial actions against countries whose names have since changed many times [...]".<sup>2</sup>

The postmodern conception of self-reflexivity addresses criticism, locus and, sometimes, irony. In *Dispatches*, Herr situates himself within journalism in order to criticize its *modus operandi* in the field of war narrative. Based on this premise, Herr avoided a literary documentation or a systematized historicism. On the contrary, his creativity and innovation lie in the fact that he transformed his memories of the Vietnam War into a discursive mechanism of investigation and examination of those recollections.

The unity or totalizing narrative that Postmodernism rejects encounters an echo in *Dispatches* due to its fragmented narrative and its variety of languages, which range from journalistic jargon to youth slang and military jargon. This operation allowed Herr to stress the real feature of the Vietnam War, which more than a bad war was a futile one, and Herr underscores his thought from the point of view of the grunts and the war

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<sup>1</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 188.

correspondents. The consequence of this reasoning is the impossibility of providing fixed or rational meaning for that conflict.

The realism through which the journalists and historians as well tried to portray Vietnam is, in *Dispatches*, realism inside out. The brutality of the war and the devastation it caused in the environment and on the Vietnamese people is a realism whose representation is constructed by hybrid language and imagery picked up from the experiences of the individual, whose effect in the reader is rather nihilistic. Herr's self-reflexivity goes beyond the form of journalistic texts about war in general. But he also brings light to the content of the journalistic productions that emerged from the coverage of the Vietnam War. In the following passage, style is the aim of Herr's attack:

There were correspondents all around who could break you up with their bad style and self-consciousness, but those aberrations were hardly ever beyond your understanding. Over there, all styles grew in their way out of the same haunted, haunting romance. Those Crazy Guys Who Cover The War. (p. 188)

From self-reflexivity to intertext, it is important to remember that the use of the intertexts aims to deconstruct the idea of a perfect act of originality attributed to the literary work, which was always seen as a holy conception, a perfect act of originality. The strategy of the intertext is to show that in literature, historiography, and science the texts teem with references, allusions, and even parts of other previous works and perform a specific task, what Herr shows in *Dispatches* is that the same stratagem applies to the field of journalism and war narratives by and large.

In the chapter entitled "Breathing In", the narrator sets up a discussion around the beginning of the Vietnam War and conjectures on some possible dates and marks. It will depend on the point of view of the one who is analyzing the issue in order to establish the proper mark. In terms of the American war in Vietnam, there are three different possibilities. The first chronological mark is 1954, when the Geneva Accords were set. The second is 1961, when the Kennedy administration increased the number of American troops hidden behind the mask of special military advisors. Thirdly, the Tonkin Bay episode in 1964 and the consequent sending of ground troops by the Johnson administration in 1965.

However, the narrative of *Dispatches* has an intertext with Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, showing that the possibility of victory for the United States was already over when the body of Alden Pyle, the main character in Greene's novel, was found under the bridge at Da Kao. The narrative shows that:

Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge at Da Kao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too. (p. 49)

It is important to note how Herr's narrative criticizes the American government, under Eisenhower, for not figuring out what was clear to Graham Greene and others. The quotation above also admits that Dien Bien Phu was more than a watershed. Indeed, it should be read as a final stop for all kinds of attempts to keep Vietnam under foreign domination.

Given the fierceness of the combat at Khe Sanh, many grunts managed to find other defense mechanisms to save their lives than trust in their weaponry. Another form of defense before the fear of death encountered by the humble soldier was through faith, and some of them looked for shelter in the pages of the *Bible*. One of the grunts used irony to join a biblical verse with his own words to provide himself with protection and humor at the same time. When he wrote on the back of his jacket “yea, though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death I shall fear no Evil, because I’m the meanest motherfucker in the Valley”,<sup>3</sup> his creativity would give Michael Herr recourse to insert at the core of *Dispatches*’ content an ironic intertext which blends the holy with the profane, a kind of postmodern mixture which is very productive in terms of textuality.

In spite of not being an intention of this essay to discuss the biblical book of the *Psalms*, it is important to register that *Psalms* 91:5-7, quoted on page 154 of *Dispatches*, is categorized in the religious canon as a petition. Due to this, the *Psalms* contains words which provide the grunt’s spirit with the necessary force to carry on in the battle believing that “the terror by night; nor the arrow that flieth by day. Nor for the pestilence that walketh in the darkness [...]”<sup>4</sup> would encounter his body and soul. At the same time, this encounter in a helicopter and the conversation Herr struck up with the grunt gave him the opportunity to use the *Psalms* as an intertext, whose function is to record the paradox that emerged from the horror and the beauty.

The 1960s America was a time when many paradigms were broken and, among them, the status of truth that covered the official facts as presented by the media and the authorities, whether civil or military. The result, Hutcheon pointed out in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, “was a kind of overtly personal and provisional journalism, autobiographical in impulse and performative in impact”.<sup>5</sup> These features surpass the composition of *Dispatches* given its open, personal and provisional form of journalism with touches of Herr’s autobiography.

By the same token, the intertext is also a journalistic strategy used in narratives based on historical events, as when Herr made use of allusion to the internal facts of American life which, in some way, were deviating the focus on the Vietnam War. In Herr’s own words:

It had been a mild season for Vietnam correspondents too (the lull aside, home offices were beginning to make it clear to their Saigon bureaus that the story was losing the old bite, what with Johnson’s abdication, the spring assassinations and the coming elections), and we were either talking about how the Vietnam thing was really finished or bitching about getting shot at only to wind up on page nine. (p. 192)

The allusions contained in the quotation above refer to the notion that President Johnson was one more domino that fell given the disaster of the American intervention in Vietnam. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bob Kennedy, despite not being directly related to the war in Southeast Asia, were other fallen dominoes and, I

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<sup>3</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 155.

<sup>5</sup> HUTCHEON. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 115.

think it is not an exaggeration to suggest that one of the last dominoes to fall was America itself with the election of Richard Nixon, a President who would divide the nation in a way seconded only by the Civil War.

In the second part of the chapter entitled “Colleagues”, the epigraph Herr picked up from a song by Bob Dylan seems adequate to introduce some records related to the young soldiers’ behavior. In the sequence, Herr dissertates on the influence of the war movies in the behavior of the grunts in the battlefields of Vietnam. According to the narrative, there is an incredible blend of fact and fiction in the mind and behavior of the grunts. In Herr’s account, the war movies were incorporated by the soldiers who behaved during the battles as if they were in a movie take. Herr also shows us that the grunts aped the actions they had seen in the movies when there was a T.V. camera nearby. Herr says: “[...] there were always the ones who couldn’t let that go, these few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras”.<sup>6</sup>

Considering that the American soldiers in Vietnam and the most of the journalists and photographers who covered the war were young people, it is rather difficult to find out a narrative which dove deeply in the language and cultural life of the counter-culture, a gap that *Dispatches* filled in. The songs of The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane and others provided much more than entertainment for the soldiers and journalists in their leisure time; they also expressed their existential condition as the lyric of a song by The Rolling Stones which says that “It’s so very lonely, you’re two thousand light years from home”.<sup>7</sup>

What I can conclude from the observations above is that even in the specific approaches, whether based on New Journalism or Historiographic Metafiction or whatever, the hybridism that characterizes *Dispatches* emerges.

The literature of war, independently of genre, tends to record the causes of the conflict, which are generally political and economic. But, it also tends to appoint a kind of aesthetics of reception, in other words, how the conflict is felt and registered by the experiences of the individual, whether soldier, writer, journalist or common reader. In *Dispatches*, the fantasies of the grunts, the allusions to the theory of dominoes, the necessity to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, and the role of the press are condensed in the following passage:

But somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy, and where they did I believe that everyone knew everything about everyone else, everyone of us there a true volunteer. Not that you didn’t hear some overripe bullshit about it: Hearts and Minds, Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching Doodah; you could also hear the other, some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying, “All that’s just a *load*, man. We’re here to kill gooks. Period.” Which wasn’t at all true of me. I was there to watch. (p. 20)

If the role of the press is to witness and report the events at the front and this job presumes an objective observation, the narrative Herr produced shows exactly otherwise,

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<sup>6</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 234.



i.e., that everything is filtered through the lens of the individual. This was what happened to Herr and other correspondents during the outset of the Tet Offensive, when the battle turned up in Saigon. At the time, Herr says: “We were all in a room at the Continental Hotel that belonged to Keith Roy, the CBS cameraman. It was early May and there was a lot of heavy combat all around the city, a big offensive, friends came in from there and went out again all week long”.<sup>8</sup>

The Battle of Khe Sanh was the fiercest of the whole Vietnam War and that meant a political, moral, psychological and military watershed. But the battles which were fought there added to the geographical and topographical divisions imposed, first by the theatre of operations, then, by the Americans, resulted even in the way the press, local and foreign, should operate in the country. As Herr noted: “It had been a matter of military expediency to impose a new set of references over Vietnam’s older [...] it had its logic – with the further division of South Vietnam into four clearly defined tactical corps”.<sup>9</sup>

From geography to people, one of the factors that contributed to the American failure in Vietnam and did not allow them to conquer the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people was prejudice. This negative feeling is normally based on ignorance of the language and culture of the country where the war was fought. Even a journalist like Herr fell into this trap when he admitted that to distinguish the faces of the Vietnamese people “was like trying to read the wind.” (p. 3) This strangeness and difficulty Herr extended to the Montagnards, “the most primitive and mysterious portion of the Vietnamese population”.<sup>10</sup>

The epigraph of this essay says that Khe Sanh became President Johnson’s Dien Bien Phu, in an allusion to the beginning of the end. This conclusion was drawn by Sergeant Kirk after experiencing the harshness of the battlefield at Khe Sanh and whose words were published by Douglas Brinkley.<sup>11</sup> However, his prediction was turned into a certainty by the historians, journalists and writers who dedicated some lines to that event. Herr not only made Kirk’s words his as he compared the two battles to attribute the deeds to General Giap.

Khe Sanh was now encircled, as Dien Bien Phu had been, and where the initial attacks of March 1954 had been launched from Viet Minh trenches, the NVA had begun digging a network of trenches that would soon approach to within a hundred yards of the Marine wire. Dien Bien Phu had been the master plan of General Vo Nguyen Giap; rumors splintered from American Intelligence suggested that Giap himself was directing the Khe Sanh operation from a post somewhere above the DMZ. (p. 100)

The quotation above shows clearly that Giap deviated the attention of the American enemy. While the Americans had concentrated on Khe Sanh, the NVA and Vietcong planned and attacked more than twenty cities all over South Vietnam,

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<sup>8</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> BRINKLEY. *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War*, p. 198.

including Saigon. Although both sides had claimed victory at Khe Sanh, from the tactical point of view, General Westmoreland concluded that “the Tet Offensive was merely Phase II of a brilliant Giap strategy”.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is important to underscore that *Dispatches*, like all narratives of war, has other functions beyond those given up to now. In this sense, the words addressed by Catherine S. Brosman in her essay *The Functions of War Literature* sound quite right for the discussions of the Battle of Khe Sanh. She argues that: “Another function of war literature in modern times has been the very opposite: to demystify war and the military, with its linguistic, behavioral, and other codes and to support pacifism”.<sup>13</sup>

In the specific case of the chapter “Khe Sanh” and in *Dispatches* as a whole, the chapter also attempts to demystify the military claims, as the final outcome must be read as a great defeat for both sides, i.e., a mortal political defeat for the Americans and a military one for those who launched the Tet Offensive, aiming to conclude the war in that phase. The pacifism cited in Brosman’s concepts and worked out by the writers, the Viet Vets and others, lasted for many years in American experience and it was just softened with the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan due to the events on 9/11. In-between the end of the Vietnam War and the war on terror, there was “Desert Storm”, a military campaign led by the United States to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in the early 1990s. But, it was exactly because the national trauma of Vietnam added to the pacifist movements that the Bush, Senior, administration could not undertake a ground war in the Middle East. The literature of the Vietnam War made its contribution, joined to other efforts, to avoid a “new Vietnam” in American life.

If the literature of war has as one of its functions to depict the causes of the conflicts,<sup>14</sup> it is convenient for any kind of approach about a narrative of war to portray its political and social consequences. In *Dispatches*, the end of the siege at the Khe Sanh was followed by “Operation Pegasus”, whose main features were President Johnson’s decision of suspending the air strikes on the North “and put a closing date on his own administration”.<sup>15</sup>

Once in the war, the grunts were eager to have news from home. It is known that some news from the U.S. did not touch the heart of its soldiers in Vietnam. According to newspapers and the movie *Dear America – Letters Home from Vietnam*, the events at Kent State University in Ohio, and the protests on war in Washington and other cities, caused indignation in the grunts given the fact that, in their view, those events got more attention of the American audience than their efforts and sufferings in Vietnam.

Social conflicts of American society were reflected in the Army. Most African-American soldiers seemed to be more conscious of their role at home and in the army than their white counterparts. According to Herr’s narrative, the repercussion of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had consequences among the African-American grunts similar to those seen in American cities. Herr says:

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<sup>12</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> BROSMAN. *The Functions of War Literature*, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> BROSMAN. *The Functions of War Literature*, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> HERR. *Dispatches*, p. 155.

The death of Martin Luther King intruded on the war in a way that no other outside event had ever done. In the days that followed, there were a number of small, scattered riots, one or two stabbings, all of it denied officially. (p. 158)

Another remark I may make upon the social and moral issues at the heart of *Dispatches* as a narrative of war is about the prejudice suffered by the African-American soldiers. While the war was developing in Southeast Asia, the movement for the Civil Rights was taking the streets of America in parallel with the radical campaign of the Black Panthers. Herr's narrative shows us that there was infiltration of the Black Panthers among the U.S. troops with the objective of recruiting the young African-American grunts to their home units. In a conversation with Herr, one of such adepts of the Panthers said:

I nodded, no Viet Cong ever called me honky, and he told me that in his company alone there were more than a dozen Black Panthers and that he was one of them. I didn't say anything, and then he said that he wasn't just a Panther; he was an agent for the Panthers, sent over here to recruit. (p. 180)

As the beginning *Dispatches* begins underlining the map of Vietnam on the wall of Herr's apartment in Saigon, it closes with a map of Indochina full of dots and crosses assigning the places where Herr passed. He said that

A National Geographic map of Indochina with about a hundred pencil marks, every place I ever went there, dots and crosses and big crosses even, wherever I'd pulled through, not "scathed"; attached to every mark and the complex of faces, voices and movements that gathered around each one. (p. 255)



## RESUMO

A literatura de Guerra, independentemente de gênero, tende a registrar as causas do conflito, as quais são geralmente políticas e econômicas. Mas ela tende também a apontar um tipo de estética da recepção, em outras palavras, como o conflito é sentido e registrado pelas experiências do indivíduo, não importando se soldado, escritor, jornalista ou leitor comum. Em *Dispatches*, as fantasias dos soldados, as alusões à teoria dos dominós, a necessidade de conquistar os corações e mentes do povo vietnamita e o papel da imprensa são condensados nesta memorável narrativa não ficcional.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Vietnã, soldado, batalha

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