

the background of corpses, and unreliable information in general as well as the incessant, intimate media coverage resulting in the live presence of Vietnam in American homes – did not prompt a comprehension of this military conflict that ought to have been more verifiable and intense in terms of accuracy. Instead, the continuous, near to identical, image trailers undermined the American perception of this 'techno-war' and provoked a notion of an amorphous 'unreality'. John Hellmann, for instance, pinpointed it when he said that this "was a media war, highly visible in the morning papers and on the evening news; paradoxically, it was an unreal war, characterized by recurring images of destruction, power, and speed in place of any visible enemy, geographical objectives, or lines of conflict" (Hellmann (1980:141)). Moving along this line of reasoning, Herr described the plethora of (illusory) images, facts, and reports as gradual diminution of usable information, thus as communicative entropy³, which could not but put into question any representation of this event: "I went to cover the war and the war covered me [...];" the problem, Herr continues, "was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes" (Herr 20). A decade after Herr and Vietnam, Peter Straub⁴ joined the US-American Vietnam remembrance and sense-making discourse with his novel *Koko* (1986). With an even greater distance to the actual event, he set out to tackle the national obsession with Vietnam. In doing so, he also faced the problem of how to approach that war and make it 'plausible' through his fiction.

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It is the multifaceted figure of the war veteran that stands in the center of Straub's text. Since this character first appeared in the late 1960s, he has taken on a variety of roles in popular culture fictions⁵. While at first being exploited as the semi-official avenger who used his fighting qualities to purge the society of criminal vice and corruption, at the same time he was presented as the solitary maniacal psychopath. This emblematic pathology found its explanation by what then started to be called 'Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome', i. e. traumatizing feelings of guilt, rage, and despair stemming from the combat experience. Thus, although the veteran had returned to the States, he had not come home. Denied of the chance to reintegrate into society, he found himself entangled in a world he could no longer understand. Later, this role was succeeded by the pacified

³ 'Communicative entropy' is to be associated with the realm of cybernetics.

⁴ Together with Stephen King, Straub is one of the high-profile horror-and-mystery writers in the USA.

⁵ For an instructive survey of the Vietvet-character in popular fictions, cf. Clark (1991: 180ff.).

and socially reintegrated cop or private eye. In the 1990s, the veteran eventually either tinkers with his role as a cop/private eye or develops from the intelligent, repentance seeking ex-soldier into the affable loser⁶.

In response to the news of the brutal killings committed by a Vietvet named Koko in Southeast Asia in the early 80s, Straub's text becomes a story of detection. Four ex-GIs now living in the USA set out to find him. If the self-declared private detectives initially have the impression that they are merely hunting for a 'cracked-up' serial killer who used to be their soldier buddy, they must soon realize that their first judgement lacks differentiation: Koko's deeds are closely connected to the war experience. For the veterans, the search for the criminal turns into an exploration of their own dark past, which in turn has been 'hunting' them ever since the war ended. The true reason of their quest is a traumatizing feeling of guilt about war crimes their platoon committed in Vietnam.

Apart from investigating Koko's enigmatic crimes on the plot level, the text simultaneously invites the reader to follow into the elaboration of a comprehensive picture of the Vietnam War and its social prerequisites. Although the case of Koko illustrates vividly the process of coming to terms with Vietnam, the veterans have all been suffering from the war's aftereffects. This narrative form leads to what might be called an 'overdetermination' of the whodunit-genre. I thereby mean the disclosure of (surplus) background information on the characters' past and present, their traumatizing war experiences and their efforts to recover which transcends the confines of the formulaic detective story, namely the puzzle in form of a narrative presenting the "process of solving a crime, working backward from its visible effects to its hidden causes and to the concealed identity of the culprit"⁷.

The extensive study of the veterans and their past as well as the present situation both in the USA and in Southeast Asia initially generates the impression that aggression and crime are ubiquitous phenomena. Straub brings the reader to this conclusion by means of modeling Milwaukee as a simplified microcosm which spawns aggression and inclination toward violence: Koko aka Dengler who was born and raised in Milwaukee ponders, for example, that "as for fear of death [...] you saw at least as much violence outside the normal Milwaukee tavern as in the average fire; inside [...] you saw a bit more" (Straub 17). This notion of war instead of peace prevailing in the USA is interlinked to the description of the events in Vietnam.

⁶ As to the loser (the 'last standing' fighter plane pilot in *Independence Day*, for instance), a dishonorable discharge from the army or abuse of alcohol and drugs cannot deprive him of his fighting qualities or his patriotism even if the latter occasionally goes astray. The perhaps best known would-be avenger turned into a psychopath can be seen in Travis Bickle, Martin Scorsese's protagonist in *Taxi Driver*. Thomas Magnum in the TV series *Magnum, P.I.* may serve as the best example of the private investigator who lives in peace with himself and his surroundings.

⁷ cf. Pyrhönen (1994: 9ff.).

Images that describe the combat situation and which the text brings forth evoke a sense of irrationality and violence. Quite often they seem to be commensurate with splatter movies:

Calvin Hill noisily continued to die, [the dead soldier] looked stupid and hungry. [...] Wallace's left leg blew sideways and seemed to run above the field for a short time [...] . 'Rock'n roar!' Elvis [Vietnamese sniper] shouted from up in the trees (Straub 163–64).

Other fighting scenes, in which italicized insertions seemingly objectify the action and which are partly narrated in slow motion, do not have the power to explain anything. Instead, they call up a picture of the grotesque as a substitute for a rational commentary:

'You think this field is mined?' Beevers asked. *You men think this field is mined? screamed Lieutenant Beevers.* [...] 'Follow this, it has more balls than you do,' he said, and he cocked his arm back and tossed his helmet as far as he could out into the field. We all watched it sail up. [...] *They watched the lieutenant's helmet disappear into the gray air and the swarming bugs. By the time the helmet hit the ground it was nearly invisible [...]* (Straub 158–59).

Rather than presenting one version of how it really was, these scenes convey versions of how it may have been. Compared to the narrational strategy of the detection story, the various points of view given here generate as much confusion. The story is not narrated in a continuous, linear progression, but is interrupted repeatedly, pushed backward, hence slowed down. Accordingly, the intertwined versions and variants of an event are brought before the readers whose task it is to invent their own picture(s).

Thus, Straub's *Koko* becomes a 'looking glass text', which negotiates a highly sensitive issue like Vietnam in such a way as to elucidate the irrationality of this war. The reader may thereby observe the potential conditions which made Vietnam possible. Moreover, several options are offered how to tackle the legacy and solve the aftereffects of the military conflict, be they comfortable or not⁸. It clearly favors the process of an intensive self-questioning which veterans have to undergo. In doing so, it is necessary to imaginatively connect the past and the present, which the text highlights through its leitmotif movement *backwards and forwards*. That means that both the story and the narrative structure are continuously crisscrossed by a to-and-fro which, on the deeper level of meaning, serves to characterize the task of the heart and the mind, namely to master a mental time

⁸ Straub may have been reproached by veterans for not having served in Vietnam, yet drawing too comical-grotesque a picture of the war and even telling those who fought there how to solve their problems.

jumping, i. e. to undertake a cognitive-imaginative journey *backwards and forwards*⁹.

Literary innovativeness in *Koko* that can be ascribed to the fictional sense-making lies in the incorporation of metafictional compositional strategies into the detective narrative. Not only does the text as a detective story with its intrinsically self-reflexive impulse probes the readers' faculties, it also engages them in an epistemological examination through the metafictional composition. Metafiction, then, is to be understood as a textual device that makes the creation process of the whole text transparent by reflecting on it, i.e. shedding light on the various disruptions in its contents, form, and style as well as disappointing the readers' expectations of a fixed end by offering a variety of versions (that characterize *Koko*). By oscillating between the act of creation and critical reflection thereupon, metafictional deconstruction not only offers a better understanding of narrative structures, but makes it possible to recognize the world as a fabricated net of mutually linked semiotic systems¹⁰. So, metafictional make-ups are based upon a socio-cultural self-consciousness and the notion that reality is contingent on the individual's cognition, and that it can be apprehended only by means of fiction. This recognition, I would claim, makes Straub's text valuable for all those who are still looking for one (and only one) truth, be it a justification or strict condemnation of the war's conduct by all sides. My central argument thus rests on the conviction that *Koko* demonstrates to what extent popular narratives, such as the detective novel, make it possible to deal with an issue like Vietnam in a complex way. If, moreover, such narratives are subversively undermined (i. e. through metafictional devices), their capacity as a fictional agency through which conflicts of value can be symbolically solved (if only temporarily) may be further enhanced.

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On the occasion of the "Vietnam Films" festival, which took place in Berlin (Germany) recently, Vietnam's film archives opened for the first time to show perspectives by Vietnamese artists and journalists on the war against the USA. This corrective of the 'other' side is able to both revise and revive (our) predominantly western conceptions of this conflict, as they are generated through an (whether deliberately or not) America-centered, simplistic picture. Moreover, questions arise which are closely connected to the still hotly debated issue 'Vietnam': do the wars in the Gulf, in Yugoslavia, or in Chechnya engender new obsessions? How will future fictions deal with them? It is possible that the

⁹ I am referring to Ringnalda (1994: 118ff.) who elaborates on this point.

¹⁰ cf. Waugh (1980: 9).

iconographic allusions to Vietnam – cf., for instance, the recent US-movie on the Second World War, *The Thin Red Line* -, or the dispute over the legitimacy of the involvement¹¹ will not only not cease; instead, Vietnam is likely to epitomize the case where fiction and fact have to converge more than ever so that the two together can try to convert an increasingly disordered experience of war into resonant and dramatic fictional revelation – something that neither of them alone can master.

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¹¹ The most recent work on Vietnam I can think of is by Michael Lind (1999) *Vietnam: The Necessary War. A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict*, published with The Free Press, New York.