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Derealization and Re-instantiation of the Military Experience in American Fiction about the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

Abstract

The article proposes a comparative reading and analysis of fictional works about the so-called War on Terror, focusing in particular on the ways in which narratives by former soldiers such as Redeployment *by Phil Kley,* The Yellow Birds *by Kevin Powers and the short stories collected in* Fire and Forget *edited by Roy Scraton and Matt Gallagher represent a problematic attempt to fictionalize traumatic experiences. In fact, on the one hand, following the reflections on the idea of derealization as theorized by philosophers and thinkers such as Jacques Baudrillard or Slavoj Žižek, I will argue that novels about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars show an ambiguous relationship to the reality they depict. On the other hand, these novels and stories offer a possible counter-narrative of the events and may function as a potential re-instantiation of the experience itself for the soldiers/writers, who, in recounting or "inventing" their own experience, relive and re-enact the traumatic facts, thus allowing the reader to enter these facts from a challenging position.*

Keywords: *war literature, Iraq War fiction, derealization, American literature*

> *"The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are or why you are there and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity."*
>
> (Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*)

In the essay *The Power of History* (1997), Don DeLillo claimed that "fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance" (1997, np). Besides discussing the anecdotal episode at the origin of his masterpiece *Underworld* (1997)—namely, the juxtaposition between the two images referring respectively to the Giants winning the pennant and to one of the first Soviet nuclear experiments as reported on the *New York Times* front page on October 4, 1951 (DeLillo 1997)—the text might be seen as an extended commentary on the importance of literature in representing historical events through an effort of the imagination.

To this extent, DeLillo dwells in particular on the role of fiction as an instrument to create *counter-narratives* and even a *counterhistory*, where the writer is called to examine "the small anonymous corner of human experience" (DeLillo 1997, np). Following this strategy, according to DeLillo the writer works her/his way through official documents and fictional instances to re-create and reconstruct what had happened.[1] Thus, as for the theoretical ideas expressed in *The Power of History,* what is particularly important for the present essay is the role of fiction in conveying different voices and approaches to striking events. Far from being a monadic construction, in Michel Foucault's words an "event is not a segment of time. Basically, it is the point of intersection between two durations, two rates of change, two evolutions, two lines of history" (in Flynn 2005, 75). According to such a view, an event is not merely what happened but also the series of the particular and multiple ways in which what happened is lived, interpreted, and re-stored according to different perspectives.

Yet, when war is the event in question, interpreted and reported in *fictional* accounts, the ancient saying according to which "in war, truth is the first casualty" immediately comes to mind. However, truth is not the only—certainly not the most—problematic aspect of contemporary war novels, and in what follows the main focus will be on the literary strategies adopted by veterans of the Terror Wars of Afghanistan and Iraq in writing about their own experience as well as on the implications deriving from this decision. Thus, successful and discussed novels and short story collections such as *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, *Redeployment* (2014) by Phil Klay and the collection *Fire and Forget* (2013) edited by Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton will be considered as displaying a problematic coexistence of strengths towards derealization and re-instantiation of the experience lived by the soldier-writers, while showing some recurrent topics of war literature. In fact, if on one hand a certain degree of derealization is almost implicit in the very choice of *fictionalizing* the lived facts and events, on the other hand, these narratives problematize the possibility of a 'tranquil recollection' and seem instead to become a means to re-instantiate those facts—namely, to try to give form once again to the complexity of effects and affects connected with the reality of war as *felt* by them. In this sense, re-instantiation is not merely the process of externalizing and objectifying a traumatic memory by giving it a fictional form; rather, in doing so, the writer—as well as the reader—re-explores and gains access to the contradictory tensions and intersections of thoughts embodied in every dramatic moment.

[1] This is the way DeLillo himself tackles the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in *Libra* (1988), for example, as well as other important historical events reported in *Underworld*. On this see Mott 2000.

1. Forms of derealization at war

It might be argued that as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the so called "War on Global Terror" declared by the then-president George W. Bush in the immediate aftermath of that event[2] extended and perpetrated a form of spectacularization of violence and conflict that contributed to increase the divide between protagonists, victims and spectators on multiple levels, as well as that between reality and representation. In two provocative and highly controversial texts devoted to the Twin Towers attacks, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard read them as a supreme affirmation of the power of *fiction* and images to simulate and diminish the impact of reality. Wondering how and if reality can actually outstrip fiction, Baudrillard argues that

> [i]f it seems to do so, this is because it has absorbed fiction's energy, and has itself become fiction. We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image […] it is a kind of duel between them, a contest to see which is the most unimaginable. The collapse of the World Trade Center towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. (2003, 28)

Of course, Baudrillard was not new to such goading. During the First Gulf War, he denounced a profound sense of dis-perception and finally of de-realization originated by the massive mediatization of that conflict in three polemical articles originally published on *Libération* and *The Guardian*, then reissued in the pamphlet *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991). Here the philosopher reflects on the use of technologies and media to cover the war and produce a form of "hyperrealism" where it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish between the real and its virtual representation (Baudrillard 1995, 27). Furthermore, the very notion of 'hyperreality' was employed by Baudrillard from the end of the 1970s to describe a simulated reality whose referent is already a simulation, and whose matrix has been consequently erased and lost forever, leaving us in what he defined as "the order of simulacra" (Baudrillard 1993).

Once again, the subtle line between facts and fiction blurs. And while it is true that war, as an extreme event, is made of individual stories, it nonetheless became clear that it is increasingly necessary to pay attention to the *way* these stories are tailored and delivered.[3] In this regard, the First Gulf War has been regarded as the most broadcasted conflict ever, to the point that

[2] The invasion of Afghanistan occurred on October 7, one month after the attacks, while the first strikes on Baghdad started in March 2003. For a chronology of the events, see the webpage *A Timeline of the U.S.-Led War on Terror*: https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/war-on-terror-timeline. Last visited 13/12/2023.

[3] Such a debate sadly returned topical on the occasion of the ongoing war in Ukraine, where official and unofficial media are playing an essential role in constantly orienting the public opinion with regard to the direct or indirect engagement of other countries.

intellectuals and thinkers started to talk about 'diminished reality' and 'impoverished experience' of the Real (Baudrillard 1995; Virilio 2002). Built on a similar line of inquiry were the reflections of sociologist Paul Virilio, who considers such a form of diminishment as strictly related to the increasing possibilities of vision offered by advanced war technologies (Virilio 1989). Commenting on that, Antonio Scurati suggests that

> In contrast to the traditional structure of human experience, this reduction is so profound as to imply a derealization of the conflict, a sort of 'ghostification' that is followed by the destruction of the warrior's personality through the disintegration of his/her sensorial faculties. (Scurati 2003, 44, my translation)[4]

From that moment on it seemed that almost every major event acquired importance and value in light of the power of its images and re-presentations. Such a paradigm reached its peak with 9/11 footage, when the sense of de-realization produced by media seemed to erase the event itself, making a "desert" out of the Real, as Slavoij Žižek's fortunate formula goes (Žižek 2002). This view of reality as nothing more than an "effect," a "fascination," or finally, a "semblance" (Žižek 2002, 19), is surely provocative, but continues to be reflected also in the massive use of 'virtual realities' and simulations—in the broadest sense (i.e. videogames, 3D sets, advanced technologies)—even more diffused in warfare.

In this perspective of derealization, even the combat zone risks to be conceived of as a seat where images and systems of vision more and more defined compete with each other and tend to 'outstrip reality' by reducing the soldier's very experience to a simulation.[5] To this extent, if the First Gulf War was the first fully broadcast and 'mediatized war,' in the Second Gulf War this sense of derealization has been perceived as even more pervasive, with the result that such an unprecedented amount of images of violence induced a generalized sense of apathy and voyeurism in the spectator as well as among military ranks.[6] On this same line of inquiry, this time with reference to the lives of the bombed populations, Judith Butler speaks of a

[4] The original quotation reads: "Rispetto alla struttura tradizionale dell'esperienza umana, questa diminuzione è tanto profonda da implicare una derealizzazione del conflitto, una sua fantasmizzazione, cui si accompagna la distruzione della personalità del guerriero tramite la disintegrazione delle sue facoltà sensoriali."

[5] For deeper argumentation on these ideas see Scurati 2003. Scurati also touched upon a general idea of "inexperience" with reference to the theme of the representation of violence in his *La letteratura dell'inesperienza* (Scurati 2006).

[6] On this perspective, see Mirzoeff 2005. Shocking Abu Ghraib images showing US soldiers torturing prisoners are among the most emblematic and extreme examples of this de-realization process verging on dishuman behavior to be shot on camera. On this subject also see Mazzarella 2011.

dehumanizing "derealization of loss"—or "insensitivity to human suffering and death" (Butler 2004, 148) always resulting from the increasing diffusion of images of violence in the media representations of the war on terror.

But such a multifaceted derealization is not only produced by images. French journalist and writer Christian Salmon, in his book *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (2007), analyzes the way in which public personalities, political parties, marketing managers, as well as the economic and financial world, make use of narratives to produce convincing and reliable stories in order to better sell products.[7] Salmon argues that the practice of *storytelling* is a fundamental aspect of public life and has become a crucial element in a society growing ever more permeable to different kinds of fictions. In this sense, he understands storytelling more as a machine than just as a simple tool or instrument, because telling stories is a skill increasingly required in high level positions in order to generate an industrial production of 'myths,' from the birth of an important company to the rise of a political figure. In this sense, as will be shown later, even the American narrative about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to restore an almost mythical idea of war and of the soldiers who fought there.

However, for the moment it is worth noting that Salmon's book discusses a variety of cases and problems among the most pressing in contemporary societies and devotes a chapter to the intensive use of storytelling and literature in the representation of war. In this sense, he focuses on the tight cooperation between the US Government, the US Army and the video game industry (Salmon 2010), as the latter was asked since the 1990s to develop specific games and simulators to be used in military training. The use of such software increased over time, and soldiers sent to Afghanistan and Iraq were trained to fire and fight in simulated and virtual environments which are meant to re-present and 'fictionalize' a war zone: "'synthetic theaters of war' which combine immersion in an interactive virtual world with a narrative of a story that is lived by characters" (Salmon 2010, 104). Obviously, the main risk of similar operations is to reduce the variety of possibilities to a restricted number of stereotyped situations, with a limited range of codified elements, actions, and reactions.

[7] The original title of Salmon's book is *Storytelling. La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*. Though the English version of the title focuses on the idea of being taken by stories into a sort of 'bewitched' world, the interesting idea expressed in the original title was that this use of narrative is nowadays an industrial machine, a systematic generator of stories applied to all the central fields of contemporary life.

At a more general level, this example illustrates one possible outcome of the tension between fictional systems of representation and the reality of war.[8] Another unsurprising case is represented by government propaganda employed to confuse and convince the public opinion. In the months preceding the invasion of Iraq, as well as during the whole conflict, the storytelling machine was set in motion, and the majority of American media started a campaign that traced a clear us/them division also nourished by the climate of Islamophobia diffused after 9/11. Alongside watchwords like "War on Terror," "Patriot Act," and a generalized "State of Exception" (Agamben 2003), the partition between good and evil, friends and enemies, was meant to test the public opinion with respect to the decision of invading a sovereign country on an accusation of nuclear weapons proliferation then revealed to be false.

2. Literature through the (military) lines

It is hard to say whether literature might offer an actual way out of such a state of numbness, but certainly the impressive production of war novels that started circulating around the 2010s contributed to expanding the field of vision—and of experience—by introducing other perspectives on the events. Although they cannot be fully regarded as *counternarratives*, for the majority of them are well-situated into only one side of the conflict, fictional accounts by soldiers and embedded journalists within the military ranks provide the reader with information and stories that helped restore the material presence of militaries actually on site.

In contrast to the scanty—when not inexistent—production of fictional accounts concerning the First Gulf War, in fact, the high number of novels and short stories about the Second Gulf War cannot be considered as just a coincidence or an accident. Rather, it might be regarded as a possible reaction to the generalized sense of derealization brought about by an increasingly powerful and pervasive presence of media coverage and technologies. From this point of view, one can also consider the rise of *milblogs* and *warblogs*, where soldiers directly recounted and expressed their own feelings and sentiments about the war, as a potential counterpoint to official reports. An interesting example is offered by former US Army Captain Matt Gallagher, who wrote the blog *Kaboom: A Soldier's War Journal* from 2007 to 2008, where he reported in detail some of the experiences he and his platoon underwent in Iraq. The blog was then closed by order of Gallagher's superiors, but the writer nonetheless published some of those accounts in the book *Kaboom* (2010), giving voice to the soldier's impatience with government decisions and strategies.

[8] As for some of the most advanced technologies such as robotics and implemented systems of AI simulations employed by warfare, see also Singer 2009.

On the other hand, as Giorgio Mariani points out, a renewed interest in war narratives also seemed to be related to the widespread climate of "the militarization of both American culture and of everyday life in the new Millennium" (Mariani 2016, 124, my translation)[9] as an almost direct consequence of the post-9/11 militaristic turn of the welfare and warfare. Such a situation contributed to the increased interest in the army and in military affairs, and boosted a neat division between the 'military front' and the civilian 'internal front,' between soldiers and those who didn't take part in the war, reactivating a common idea according to which only veterans are ultimately authorized to talk about their traumatic experience.

Such a division also seems to lay at the core of many contemporary war novels about Iraq and Afghanistan. However, before focusing on some famous fictions by veterans, among the novels written from the 'civilian side' it is worth mentioning the acclaimed book by Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), acknowledged as one of the most provocative and intelligent works about the Iraq war. The novel tells the story of the Bravo Squad's men who distinguished themselves in a ferocious firefight in Iraq that was caught on camera and then uploaded on YouTube. Soldiers are brought back home as national heroes for a two-week *Victory Tour* (interviews, a formal invitation to the White House and various public speeches). Together with several stars of the showbiz they are also invited as guests of honor to the traditional Football match on Thanksgiving Day, where a Hollywood producer proposes that they make a movie out of their war story. But this time of almost total "vacation" (Fountain 2012, 94), lived by soldier Billy Lynn as a distorted reality, is meant to finish soon, and all the squad is sent back to the front. As a matter of fact, the absurdity of a progressive derealization of the war experience, this time turned into a spectacular event, is also meant to underline the way in which the faceted warfare deeply affects the internal front also as a commercial business. It is the impoverishment of the soldiers' traumatic experience, alongside an increasingly strident proximity between the 'lived war' and the star system, that causes Lynn's mental breakdown.

On the contrary, novels such as *The Yellow Birds* by former machine gunner Kevin Powers, awarded with the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the short story collection *Redeployment* by ex-Marine Phil Klay, that won the National Book Award in 2014, and the stories by former soldiers collected and edited by veterans Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher under the title *Fire and Forget* (2013) are but a few examples of the many books about Iraq that have been published

[9] The original quotation reads: "militarizzazione sia della cultura sia della vita quotidiana americane nel nuovo millennio."

within a handful of years and contributed to renew a different attention to those wars.[10] A great number of these books, in fact, according to what their authors declare in interviews, are attempts to answer one question in particular: "what was it like over there?". Still, other questions are hidden behind this one, especially for soldiers who decided to answer it by giving a fictional account of their memories instead of more comfortably relying on non-fictional genres: how is it possible to write about war? Does war need a different language? Is there any language capable of describing the "folly of war"? And, more in general, how to overcome the impossibility of talking about tragic events? These questions are recurrent in war literature and haunt these novels in many ways, with several strategies and styles, yet with a handful of common features worth being considered.

2.1 Mapping the distance(s)

One of the major concerns of these stories is how to represent the distance between facts and fiction, reality and representation. An interesting feature adopted in some of these books is the use of detailed maps and the accurate description of geographical references of the fighting zone, as if to precisely locate stories and people into the 'real' place. Books such as *Kaboom* (2010) by Matt Gallagher or *Outlaw Platoon* (2012) by Sean Parnell and John R. Bruning, for example, have black and white printed maps on the first pages that seem to serve a double purpose: on the one hand they provide the reader with coordinates, just like in the case of military operations, on the other these maps function as a scale model where the writer can introduce the narrative by re-creating the situations experienced.

Yet, in other cases the exact geographical reference is somehow ambiguously blurred into an indistinct vision. In the closing pages of *The Yellow Birds,* for instance, the useless map of Iraq that the protagonist, Bartle, contemplates vanishes and is turned into a mix of memories and imagination, followed by the ecstatic vision of the transfigured corpse of his friend killed in action and taken by the river Tigris into the open sea, as if entering an eternal and mythical space-time. The narrator is conscious that "the map would become less and less a picture of a fact and more a poor translation of memory in two dimensions. It reminded me of talking. How what was said is never quite what was thought, and what is heard is never quite what was said" (Powers 2013, 225). That's why, in an almost lyrical transfiguration, he decides to give this map the concreteness of a body, by describing how everything will finally be re-composed in a frame eternally impressed onto an ultimately ambiguous memory. In this sense, an equivalent might

[10] For an extended discussion on these and other narratives about early 21st Century wars fought by the United States see Mariani 2016.

be traced between this closing scene and the first pages of a classic text of war literature like Michel Herr's *Dispatches* (1977). Herr describes an out-of-date map of Vietnam that "wasn't real anymore" and, after a few lines, talking about other maps, he declares that "reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind" (Herr 1991, 3). This first part, titled "Breathing in," represents a sort of entrance into an alternative world where common coordinates are useless, because the map which is meant to orientate no longer finds an actual and real correspondence with the territory.

In Herr's thinking this is also a metaphor for the weakness of language, because the experience of Vietnam seems to exceed the possibility of an understanding as well as that of any communication.[11] Vietnam is thus perceived as something that cannot be compared with anything but itself, and the experience lived during the period spent with the soldiers took time to emerge and make sense for the writer. As Herr writes: "I went to cover the war and the war covered me […]. It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later" (1991, 20). War is thus a totalizing experience that necessarily modifies language and changes the point of view about everything, almost limiting the possibilities of imagination, because "war is only like itself," as stated again by Powers' narrator (2013, 241). Furthermore, as Donald Ringnalda pointed out in his study on the Vietnam war literature, "[b]eing 'covered' by war does not mean simply that Herr was overwhelmed by the war; it means he was *written* by it" (Ringnalda 1994, 77). Curiously, this same idea is revived by writer Colum McCann in his *Foreword* to the collection *Fire and Forget*, when he writes: "We are scribed by war. It is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us. It is also the job of literature to make sense of whatever small beauty we can rescue from the maelstrom" (Scranton and Gallagher 2013, vii).

However, while narratives about Vietnam frequently revolve around forms of incommunicability experienced by the traumatized veterans trying to report their experience, things are different in the case of novels about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In the novels under discussion, the soldier's experience, and war in general, far from being deprecated or clearly condemned and criticized, seem to reacquire a noble *allure* (Sacks 2015). The army and the war are alternatively described as formative experiences contributing to the protagonist's growth and personal development on one side, and as traumatic experiences on the other.

[11] A detailed and extended reading of Herr's novel, as well as of the recurring themes and issues concerning the narratives about the Vietnam war, can be found in Rosso 2003.

Maps are part of such a juxtaposition too. In the broadest sense, they function as tools of identification and control by reducing the complexity of every territory or actual region to a grid. In order to restore that complexity, in the case of the war novels under discussion, fiction provides the soldiers with a powerful instrument of analysis and re-presentation. It is in this sense that Powers tried to "create the cartography of one's man consciousness" (2013, 242). Contrary to what he did while serving in the Army, where maps are used just for military operations, as a writer he wants to create a different 'map,' which represents the intricacy of a human mind and of his own memories. In this sense, the map does not work just as a re-presentation of the territory but as a re-instantiation of the ways in which that territory has been felt and perceived by the soldier-writer. The separation between the map and the territory, thus, seems to be a pivotal element because it metaphorically reproduces the same tension felt between the superficial and stereotypical knowledge of the combat zone from the outside and the concrete reality that soldiers experienced. Thus, language and fictional accounts of the events have the capacity of expanding the flat surface of the map, by making it inhabited with 'flesh-and-bone' soldiers whose stories are relived and whose experiences are re-instantiated thanks to the power of fiction. Nevertheless, soldier-writers also have a more complex way of dealing with the contrast between facts and fiction. Feelings and memories re-acquire a presence, a thickness even if—or maybe exactly because—they are part of a plot, which helps to go from the linear and two-dimensional reality of the *map*—or of the *screen*—to a more concrete and involving one. As briefly stated before, a lack of direct experience is conceived of as a central problem in recent representations of war. That is also another reason why contemporary war novels are to be regarded as symptomatic of a process that is affecting the entire way in which wars are perceived and lived.

The editors of the *Fire and Forget* collection, for instance, are fully aware of such a process and present this awareness in the preface as follows: "we each knew the problem we altogether struggled with, which was how to say something true about an experience unreal, to a people fed and wadded about with lies" (Scranton and Gallagher 2013, xiii). As 'spectators,' we often hear about "Fake Wars" (Meyssan 2019) with reference to the fact that the advancement of technologies employed by armies allows for 'sterilized' attacks and operations led by people that might not be even present in the combat zone. In the case of drones and remote-control bombs, military targets are but small crosses on a monitor placed in a distant Forward Operating Base (FOB), where 'employees' rarely get directly involved in the fight. Such figures are criticized by other soldiers, who refer to them with the pejorative name of *Fobbit* (a wordplay on the words 'Fob' and 'hobbit'), as explained in David Abrams' novel of the same name (Abrams 2012). But

if it is true that war has always been a matter of technological implementation and, at least since the 20th century, every conflict is also fought outside the combat zone, a generalized apathy towards death, either in the war context or out of it, is emerging as one of the most striking outcomes of such a distancing between reality and simulation. Such a dis-perception also affects soldiers' lives even after the war. Indeed, veterans come back to a country where they feel like outsiders. In McCann's words, "the truth of the matter is that you can't go back to the country that doesn't exist anymore" (Scranton and Gallagher 2013, x).

Here is another classical *topos* of war literature: the impossible return of soldiers to their previous lives, which is another trait these novels share with Vietnam war narratives.[12] The experience of war radically modifies the perception of things, and this idea is central to Klay's collection *Redeployment* (2014), often compared with O'Brien's works both in terms of narrative strategies and themes. In this sense, it seems that there is a necessary relationship between the experience of war and the need to talk about it, to the point that the only way back home for the soldiers is to narrate what they have been through, in order to survive. Consequently, veterans seem to fit into their new lives only by means of stories, yet they are aware of the ambiguity of every war story, because, as one of the protagonists of Klay's narratives pointed out: "I don't trust my memories. I trust the vehicle, burnt and twisted and torn. Like Jenks. No stories. Things. Bodies. People lie. Memories lie" (Klay 2014, 226). And of course, the word 'redeployment' itself has something to do with the concept of re-positioning; a redeployed soldier is not one who comes home, but rather someone who has been assigned to another task, a different 'military order.' So, to come back to ordinary life becomes just another 'mission.' In fact, as it emerges from these stories, it is arguable that soldiers come home at all; rather, they are just moved to a once familiar place where they cannot feel at home anymore, and where they keep craving for extreme sensations. In Klay's book nothing begins and nothing ends, but the different stories merely produce a transition: the action of memory over the present. In the short story that gives the collection its title, for example, a discharged soldier projects images of the destroyed city of Falluja upon the products aligned on the supermarket's shelves, and he looks for shelter as if he were under enemy fire (Klay 2014, 180).

The case of *Redeployment* is then hard to be labelled. Contrary to some of the previous examples, in fact, Klay does not feel the need to put all the pieces of his personal experience together in a

[12] The ambivalent position about the aftermath of war is central in classic works like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, in the stories collected in O'Brien 1990, as well as in the numerous testimonies collected in Baker 1983, in particular the section titled "Homecoming" (Baker 1983, 239-269).

single perspective, but rather decides to follow various potential viewpoints from the war zone. Each story conveys a different perspective, and the first-person narrator constantly changes so as to cover as many ranks and experiences as possible. Through these stories we enter the point of view of a military chaplain, a sergeant, a paramedic, a military reporter, a psychologist, and all these narrators shed light on specific tasks composing the complex reality of war. No heroic actions are told, just the variety of experiences lived day after day in this extreme context. The only home for these characters is circumscribed to their distorted memories, and this is also the *actual* shape they give to their experience. What Klay seems to suggest is that the confused and chaotic amount of realities crisscrossing the combat zone might be better understood and explored by an equal mixture of voices re-instantiated by fiction. In so doing, the writer also gives an account of the diffused imagery of war, conveyed by movies, news, and media in general, that represents one of the main dangers for all the soldier-writers who try to be truthful to their experience. That's why the choice of fiction is even more relevant and challenging in this case, because in a generalized abuse of fiction, only fiction can be representative of a particular and extreme reality and can restore a potential pluralism on this experience.[13]

This brings back the theme of *counter-narratives*. As Klay himself reflects when asked about the various voices he used for the book, his main fear was that of not being understood in the choice of this overtly literary strategy; after all, every war sets up a "divide between the veteran understanding of war reality and the civilian ignorance," but "within that group of people who have been to war there's as much variation of experience as there is within any other type of human activity. And I wanted to tease out some of those differences" (Klay 2014b).

2.2. Pluralism

However, as Mariani suggests in the wake of the reflections by Sam Sacks (Mariani 2016, 141; Sacks 2015), the restricted point of view of individual American characters as a common feature of many of the novels about Iraq endorses the idea that the physically and mentally wounded veteran is the only one allowed to express an authoritative opinion about the war. To this extent, it is worth noting that even the co-editor of *Fire and Forget*, Roy Scranton, criticizes the ambiguity of these works by contesting that their ultimate rhetorical and ideological function is to reaffirm the "myth of the trauma hero" in the debate about war (Scranton 2015). Therefore, according to Scranton, while contributing to re-positioning the story and the narration at eye level, narratives like *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment* also propose a sort of aestheticization

[13] On this topic see Zeng 2016.

of war, and by inducing the reader to sympathize with the traumatized hero—the US Army soldier—they avoid conveying the point of view of the Iraqi or Afghan population destroyed by these same wars.

Such a restriction might be seen as epitomizing another level of derealization that this time affects entirely the 'other side of the conflict.' What is at stake is thus the ability to imagine the lives and the existence beyond the military screens, as well as those on the other side of the viewfinder itself. However, as pointed out by several critics (Mariani 2016; Fritzsche 2016), early works by former soldier Eliot Ackerman like *Green on Blue* (2015) or *Dark at the Crossing* (2017) have certainly the merit to further enlarge the field of vision and opt for the perspective of an Afghan boy in the first case and of an Iraqi interpreter in the second. By telling the story of Aziz, *Green on Blue* is particularly concerned with the profound situation of instability generated in the aftermath of the US-led Coalition's invasion of Afghanistan, where terrorist attacks and blind violence suddenly became a new routine devastating the lives of the local population.

More than the day-by-day traumatic experience of war as narrated by US soldiers, the long-lasting consequences of the invasion are the main topic of stories from the Iraqi perspective. In Ackerman's *Dark at the Crossing*, for instance, the Iraqi interpreter Haris Abadi, who acquired American citizenship, decides to come back to Syria to fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Another example of such a viewpoint displacement is also offered in stories and accounts written by women, both among the civilian and the military ranks. It is worth mentioning, in fact, that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars saw an unprecedented increase in the number of women-soldiers who participated in the military actions, and their experience has been recounted by journalists and writers. The memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* (2005) by Kayla Williams, who served as Arabic linguist in the Army, for instance, documents the profoundly sexist world she ended up facing in that situation; conversely, journalist and writer Helen Benedict, mainly known for her novel *Sand Queen* (2011), documented the hard condition of women at the front in her book *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (2009). On the same line, another account of such a world is *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq* (2008) by journalist Kirsten Holmstedt, who reported episodes and stories of some women-soldiers covering a broad range of roles.

More deeply concerned with the attempt to give voice to the Iraqi perspective, however, is *After Zero Hour*, written by American correspondent Janine di Giovanni. The text was published in the spring issue of *Granta Magazine* in 2015 under the emblematic title *The Map Is Not the*

Territory—a quotation from scholar Alfred Korzybski to illustrate the difference between perception and reality, as explained in the introduction by Sigrid Rausing (2015, 8). In her story, di Giovanni deals with this problem by reporting episodes that occurred to her during several trips to Baghdad before and after the American invasion and the killing of Saddam Hussein. She describes how the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural complexity of the country has been almost completely erased by the war, only to be replaced with political instability and an increasing corruption of the institutions. She also focuses her reportage on the jarring contrast between the richness of the past, which left an inestimable cultural heritage, and the poorness of the economic and political situation generated by war. Although the territory preserves some traces of that glorious past, also thanks to the effort of many local intellectuals and writers, what is known from military maps and from the constant flux of broadcast images is just an infinitesimal part of what is being destroyed. Indeed, the map is not the territory at all, and gives only a futile and useless account of it. Di Giovanni makes this clear when she talks about the cities she visited as places where different epochs, times, lives, and voices stratify and coexist, even with many difficulties. Consequently, she denounces the simplification and linearity of the maps through which we—and the soldiers as well—think we know the reality of those places.

But whereas the above-mentioned examples tackle the problem of broadening the point of view from a journalistic and almost 'documentarian' perspective, there were also cases of Iraqi writers who decided to write their own fiction, focusing on episodes concerning the American invasion and, more frequently, the consequences that followed, such as the proliferation of internal terrorist groups, the radicalization of Islamist military organizations, and the highly problematic co-existence between local population and the invaders. These are the themes addressed in the short story collection *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (2014) by writer and blogger Hassan Blasim, that might be regarded as an Iraqi counterpoint of *Redeployment*, because it aims at exploring the differences and the variety of the more or less ordinary lives and beliefs involved in the conflict. However, while *Redeployment* locates the pluralization of the point of view within the experience and the *present*—and presence—of the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, Blasim's stories trace a more expanded history of violence in Iraq's past, present and future, connecting episodes from different wars and creating a form of stratified social and collective memory. As Peter Fritzsche puts it: "in the case of Iraqi writers, war cannot but evoke cycles of internal violence in which Americans are barely present. The

year 2003 made the memory of the 1991 Gulf War, of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, and of other Iraqi domestic conflicts explode" (2016, 154).[14]

3. Conclusions

If by comparison to these works the cases of *Redeployment*, *The Yellow Birds* and the collection *Fire and Forget* show little of that 'broader view,' they nonetheless attempt a pluralization of the experience itself, as seen in the case of Klay's collection. In other words, instead of only being concerned with forms of personal healing or re-creation as opposed to different levels of de-creation, they might be seen as a re-instantiation of a personal experience that strives to become collective.

In a scene of *The Yellow Birds,* sergeant Sterling says to Bartle: "there's only one way home for real, Private. You've got to stay *deviant*" (Powers 2013, 156; my emphasis). This is the 'secret' to survive the war: a soldier is required to be detached from himself and from the others. Two separate times are implied in this idea: one is the time of war, where life and death are but a matter of chance, where the soldier is asked to act without thinking of the consequences (to 'fire and forget'), in order to carry out orders at all costs; the other time is the *after*—which is not necessarily the end of the service but could also just be the phase following a military operation, or what is called the phase of 'decompression'—when detachment is necessary to the writing process. If in the stories of *Redeployment* in fact the 'deviation' is used as a literary strategy to make writing continuously switch from one narrator to another, in *The Yellow Birds,* since the experience is focalized and centered, the two times always interact and overlap with each other. Plurality in this case derives from the alternation of memories almost equally balanced between *during* and *after* the war. The entire novel is subdivided into chapters referring to precise years and places going from one point to another in time: 2003 (training camp before being sent to Iraq), 2004 (war), 2005 (homecoming), and 2009 (new life). The narrative proceeds by mixing images and episodes, and focuses on the sensorial automatisms and instinctual reactions that the former soldier brings with him all the time.

That is why the act of writing is a way to re-instantiate the very experience and to make it acquire a new substance. To be truthful to the complexity of the event without reducing it to a simple and sterile series of facts as it is with TV news, the writer re-composes his own experience

[14] The original quotation reads: "per gli scrittori iracheni la guerra non può che rievocare cicli di violenze domestiche in cui gli americani quasi non ci sono. Il 2003 ha fatto esplodere il ricordo della guerra del Golfo del 1991, della guerra Iran-Iraq del 1980-88, e di altri episodi recenti di lotte interne irachene."

through writing, and somehow relives it and makes the reader conscious of the *affects* it produced. Additionally, in *The Yellow Birds* the variety of war is tackled by the rhetorical solution of assigning to the war itself the role of protagonist. In other terms, among the relatively few characters depicted there is the war, an event that acts and transforms people. To this extent, the first lines of the book are very evocative: "The war tried to kill us in spring. […] The war sent its citizens rustling into the shade of white buildings. It casts a white shade on everything, like a veil over our eyes. It tried to kill us every day but it had not succeeded" (Powers 2013, 3). Within the pages, it is war itself that makes up the plot and causes the characters to engage with each other on different levels. So, war is the *Event,* with a capital letter; and this means that it is also the event of writing, of de-scribing what happened as opposed to the assumption of being 'scripted by war.' Yet, war behaves according to a precise strategy, that is to separate, divide and destroy, so the function of writing is that of recognizing this strategy, to follow it and to resist it by exploring the relationships made possible by war itself.

Another issue seems to arise at this point, concerning the specific tools of language. Is language sufficient to create an account of war experiences? As seen before, although it might seem a paradox, in the case of the war novels analyzed, fiction seems to be the only way to restore the real. Far from any abuse of imagery and images that became useless and meaningless in conveying any 'realistic effect' due to their repetition, the real resists at the core of these novels. In fact, realistic references such as maps, precise locations or jargon are for the soldier-writers a way to talk about the real substance of their experience. Yet, trying to resist the derealization imposed by media and generalized storytelling, their act of re-instantiation cannot but rest on language. And, as Tim O'Brien put it in his famous *How to Tell a True War Story*, "by telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (O'Brien 1990, 179-180).

However, here the problem for the soldier-writers is not so much that of being believed as that of understanding and being understood. The only way to do so is to re-instantiate the experience in order to present it to the reader in a narrative form, so that she or he can perceive at least a part of it, knowing that what is told is at least a part of the real experience. They want people to know what it was like to be there. So, the effort they make is to describe the feelings and emotions, as well as the apathy or the total lack of emotions, exactly as they *were* over there. Instead of repeating the traumatic experience in their minds, or just re-producing an ideological schematic pattern, veterans re-elaborate it through a fictitious system of references. It is as if

they fictionalized their memory in order to better access it.[15] As US marine Jacob Sigel writes in "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," a story collected in *Fire and Forget*:

> [I] tried to make sense about what happened over there, how it all fit together, why it counted for so much if I wasn't even sure how to add it up. I sat at my computer staring at the same words – the plain words, the gruesome words, the sentimental words, words that belonged only here, had no claim to that, no purchase on the ground over there. (Scranton and Gallagher 2013, 10)

Once again, the contrast here/there, now/then, seems to challenge representational language, but nevertheless the writer tries to resist silence or pure fantasy. In this sense, literature and fiction become instruments of knowledge for the writer as much as for the reader.

Consequently, in these contemporary war novels, the act of writing acquires the status of a magnifying glass through which writers can dominate the reality he or she has been through during operative service. So, as a way to elaborate on the traumatic experience of war, writing *has* the function of creating an emotional distance between the writer and his memory, objectifying the experience thanks to a process of instantiation. The act of writing becomes thus a re-instantiation of memory, which in this way is somehow objectified into a new reality and into a form that can be shared and can affect the reader on his/her turn, who can 'access' the experience of the soldier as well as his or her uneasy and problematic process of coping with it. Such a re-instantiation is far from being resolved by the narration and brings into this objectification the same burden of ambiguity and confusion and fog that was present in the first instance, in the original experience. The possibility to conceive of the narration as a re-instantiation is thus the possibility to preserve—and try to transmit—the unresolved core of the war experience.

[15] Many of the writers started their writing career at programs and workshops provided by institutional organizations and prestigious Universities. The aim of such projects is to engage soldiers with the task of talking about their experience, in order to use writing and literature as means of rehabilitation and self-analysis. In this context, writing has the specific function to make soldiers able to explore their own feelings and memories about war by narrating them, so as to re-live them and be relieved by them. In this sense, the novels deal with PTSD-syndrome symptoms in different ways: they describe them and represent them into a fictitious form; and are thus able to interrupt the repetition of the trauma by representing this same repetition through a literary filter. An interesting statement against the efficacy of such programs is made by Bennett 2015, who overtly criticizes the system of the creative writing workshops offered by Universities to former soldiers by depicting a would-be writer that pretends to be an injured veteran and write a perfectly believable war memoir according to the workshop guidelines and mixing stories from friends and news.

On the other hand, as a way of expression, this war writing *is* a function of the experience itself, of the reality of the war itself. It is in this latter sense that novels about war written by former soldiers can undoubtedly add something to the knowledge of war and make the reader better understand the reported experiences. At the same time, only fiction allows writers themselves to return to the role of witnesses and soldiers again, in order to be able to speak about what would otherwise be erased and lost—namely, de-realized. Finally, as readers we need to consider the function of war novels in introducing us to the hell of war, while soldiers look at their stories as an inextricable function of the real that haunts them, and as a privileged access to their own memory. It is this double function that constitutes the most challenging element of these novels, but also their inescapable ultimate ambiguity.

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