

MAKING VIOLENCE VISIBLE IN VIETNAM WAR NARRATIVES: THE CASE OF "A RUMOR OF WAR"

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Before you leave here, sir, you're going to learn that one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteenth-year-old American boy.

(Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*)

Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.

(Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*)

1. On "realistic accounts"

Most of the more than two thousand works of fiction on the Vietnam War still depend on a realistic-mimetic model.¹ If you try and read them, you feel as though the experimentalism of Modernism and Postmodernism had never existed. In most cases, realism is perceived as the inevitable essence of the war story, as the ontological status of war stories, as a non-aesthetic mode, as the only authentic way to narrate the war experience. This attitude—which we may call here "the naïve realism of witnessing" and which dates back to the First World War (and somehow to the *Iliad*)—can be detected both in autobiographical novels and in memoirs.

Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, published in 1977 - the title is taken from the *Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 24:6-13 - differs from the other memoirs originated by the Vietnam War because of its overt aim to give a "more authentic account" of the conflict in East Asia (Caputo 1977: passim). Caputo, however, is an anomaly in the Vietnam Generation: most of his fellow writers are in the first instance witnesses and only in the second instance writers.² Caputo, on the other hand, had previously worked in journalism as a reporter for the "Chicago Tribune" - with a group of his newspaper colleagues he even won the Pulitzer Prize for journalism in 1972. His Vietnam experience dates back to when he was a soldier in Vietnam in 1965-66, and later a reporter covering the Fall of Saigon in April 1975. Therefore, his *A Rumor of War* took eleven years to come to light; since then it has been translated into twenty languages, has sold more than two million copies and is still available in American bookstores.³

Caputo's account covers the period in which he was actually in Vietnam, that is, long before President Johnson's "escalation" (1968) and is based on the repetitive assertion that it is not a novel, but a "soldier's account" (Caputo 1977: xiii) based on notes taken "in country" and letters written home (to "the world"). Therefore he stresses the importance of chronological time which he very soon deconstructs by means of generalizations, didactic assertions and diegetic prolepsis. Similarly, Caputo claims the superiority of the realistic model he contradicts quite often throughout his story.



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In fact, he is quite aware of the limits of realistic time when he mentions his traumatic experience:

I was twenty-four when the summer began; by the time it ended, I was much older than I am now. Chronologically, my age had advanced three months, emotionally about three decades. I was somewhere in my middle fifties, that depressing period when a man's friends begin dying off and each death reminds him of the nearness of his own (Caputo 1977: 182).

The historical setting is the period when Americans were still quite optimistic about the possible outcome of the war. The narration of the war experience proper is preceded by a short prologue aimed at directing the reader's point of view and is followed by Caputo's description of the Fall of Saigon, with the clear goal of providing the story with a historical and even "moral", teleological ending.

In the first part of the memoir, ironically entitled "The Splendid Little War", Caputo displays a narrative behavior typical of Vietnam War narratives, stressing the feeling of frustration of the American soldiers arriving in Indo-China. His first person narrator goes back to the personal motivations of the college student who enlisted in the Marines in 1960, motivations related to "the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era" (Caputo 1977: 4) and to his rebellion against dull lower middle-class life in the Chicago suburbs, and then moves on to his departure for Vietnam, five years later, when the American involvement had not yet become tragic, and Americans actually thought it would be a "splendid little war".

Nevertheless, in those days when "The loss of even one man was an extraordinary event" (Caputo 1977: 154), the narrator emphasizes the abysmal discrepancy between the myths of war heroism and the actual experience in Vietnam, a discrepancy perceived in previous wars but stressed in the present predicament. Such a discrepancy is expressed by means of a comparison – both serious and ironic – with John Wayne, the actor who, more than any other, has become the icon of western and war movies, as we can see in many works on the Vietnam War. One should remember that 1968 saw the release of *The Green Berets*, a movie directed by and starring John Wayne, the only commercially successful movie in favour of the American involvement in Indochina.

2. John Wayne and the Spectacularization of War

In order to understand the mythical significance of John Wayne as an icon it should be enough to recall that in March 1970, during a demonstration in New York, a group of building workers marched behind banners celebrating "The Duke", that is, the nickname used by John Wayne's friends and fans. If you check the slang dictionaries you'll learn that it is in those years that the verb "to johnwayne" was introduced into the American language to mean "to act heroically" (Dickson 1994: 278). In the western blockbuster *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974), when the (improbable) black sheriff (Cleavon Little) faces great difficulties in convincing the population of a small town to resist the "bad guys", he eventually asks them whether they would do such a sacrifice for John Wayne: at that the people spring to attention and accept their dangerous enterprise pronouncing with mystical enthusiasm the name of "John Wayne" as if it were the name of God. In the years to follow the syntagm "John Wayne syndrome" was also introduced to refer to the behaviour of some veterans who became involved with extreme right-wing paramilitary groups after the end of the Seventies. In 1979 US Congress granted the authorization for the "John Wayne medal" for bravery, and the picture of the actor was later used on a poster inviting young men to enlist.⁴ It is not surprising that after 9/11 John Wayne, after almost twenty years of disrepute, went back to the top of the list of the most popular movie stars and that in 2004 a mail stamp with his effigy (37

cents) was issued. So it is hardly a coincidence that Ron Kovic, lamenting the loss of his sexual organ in his commercially successful (rather than critically) *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), feels compelled to refer to John Wayne:

Gone. And it is gone for America. I have given it for democracy...I have given my dead swinging dick for America. I have given my numb young dick for democracy...Oh God! Oh God I want it back! I gave it for the whole country, I gave it for every one of them. Yes, *I gave my dead dick for John Wayne*. Nobody ever told me I was going to come back from this war without a penis. But I am back and my head is screaming now and I don't know what to do (Kovic 1976: 112, my emphasis).

Caputo avoids the grotesque crudeness of Kovic's text, but he refers to John Wayne quite often. For example, he tells of an officer yelling to his men "I don't want anyone going in there thinking he's going to play John Wayne" (Caputo 1977: 44), or he sadly remarks about his anything but heroic predicament: "So much for Hollywood and John Wayne" (Caputo 1977: 30), or later in the memoir, he says "I was John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I was Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*" (Caputo 1977: 255).⁵

At the most dramatic points of his experience, Caputo emphasizes the central role of the cinematographic mythopoesis to which John Wayne belongs perhaps more than any other 20th-century icon: "we could see only the drama of the operation. It was as though we were in an open-air theater, watching a war movie" (Caputo 1977: 67). Elsewhere, the narrator says that he saw his actions "as if I were watching myself in a movie" (Caputo 1977: 288).

The spectacular dimension of violence that can be detected in previous conflicts (even before the First World War as it appears, for example, in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*),⁶ becomes more central during the Vietnam War not only because it is the first "television war",⁷ but because of the myths of the movie spectacularization (war movies, westerns and so on) which fed the Vietnam Generation. The war witnesses display their spectacularized narcissism which refers to "phantasies of personal heroics" (Caputo 1977: 73) in terms that are definitely more visual than narrative, showing the deep influence of cinema and TV on writing. This process of spectacularization has become much more apparent today, but it is at the time of Caputo that writers began to perceive the "inferiority" of fiction in relation to cinema.

Though Caputo has no more illusions about the public motivations of the American intervention (defending "democracy", fighting against Communism and so on), he still recognizes the obscene fascination that the "dirty war" holds for him and for his buddies.⁸ After having acknowledged his nostalgia for the year spent in Vietnam, he writes very explicitly and with no shame:

Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest to himself, will have to admit he *enjoyed* the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with a commensurate pain. Under fire, a man's powers of life heightened in proportion to the proximity of death, so that he felt an *elation* as extreme as dread. His senses quickened, he attained an acuity of consciousness at once *pleasurable* and *excruciating*. It was something like the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs (Caputo 1977: xvi-xvii, my emphasis).

Caputo's narrator stresses quite often the centrality of the terms "honesty" and "fascination". When he is far from the fighting he claims that "There was a fascination in all this. More than anything

I wanted to be out there with them. Contact: that event for which so many of us lusted. And I knew that something in me was drawn to war. It might have been an unholy attraction, but it was there and it could not be denied" (Caputo 1977: 68). And back in the US he remembers that when people asked "how [he] felt, going into combat for the first time" (Caputo 1977: 76), he says that he avoided answering truthfully in order not to disturb the questioner, although he told himself that he was "happy".

One could object that this kind of acknowledgement ("pleasurable and excruciating" as in the quote above) is present in several texts of 20th-century war literature, for example, in Ernst Jünger and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. However, the fascination for combat and violence takes on a new stress here. The acknowledgement of this fascination was a constitutive aspect of war narration even in classical literature: the fascination was conveyed to the reader or the spectator through an ambiguous and possibly dangerous catharsis. But after the First World War the mythic dimension was partly dismissed – though it reappeared in some Hollywood classics, in propaganda movies in which romantic and noble heroes reappeared. On the other hand, in Vietnam War narratives the narrator is always torn between the moral condemnation for his fascination (in which he sometimes tries, without succeeding, to separate the "moral" from the "aesthetic") and an almost prophetic impulse to consider witnessing the truth as an almost sacred objective. This kind of narrator claims that, although the American soldier is aware of being guilty of unforgivable misdeeds, he thinks he is, historically, the first combatant who dared to acknowledge his fascination with violence. Thus the moral value of his account will be higher than those of the past and will make the American soldier a unique and matchless human being, the only kind of war hero still possible in the contemporary world.

Acknowledging the pleasure of violence, both painful and self-celebratory, self-accusing and partly self-absolving, often goes with the spectacularization of war and has clear sexual overtones. Caputo narrates that when he saw his men act bravely "an ache as profound as the ache of *orgasm* passed through [him]" (Caputo 1977: 254, my emphasis), and he says that it is because of this (orgasmic) sensation that some officers were ready to sacrifice themselves, not for their homeland or for a just cause, but simply for the desire "to experience a single moment when a group of soldiers under your command and in the extreme stress of combat do exactly what you want them to do, as if they are *extensions of yourself*" (ibidem, my emphasis). Elsewhere, Caputo is even clearer on this point when he writes: "This inner, emotional war produces a tension almost *sexual* in its intensity" (Caputo 1977: 278, my emphasis). In the same perspective, one can interpret the still traditional definition of courage proposed by Caputo, very traditional if compared to the self-reflexive, almost self-deconstructive tone one can find in Tim O'Brien.⁹

It is not accidental that Caputo's constant references to sexuality do not evoke any tenderness, but rather extreme sensations very close to violence, brutality, sadism, masochism, excess and perversion, escape from daily life, and present predicaments in which the victim almost always has a feminine form.¹⁰

3. Vietnam Veterans' Aphasia

In the second half of the 1970s, also thanks to the publication of texts like *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo, *Dispatches* (1977) by Michael Herr and *Going After Cacciato* (1978) by Tim O'Brien, but especially to the circulation of commercially successful movies like *The Deerhunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), one could perceive a revaluation of personal accounts which could be interpreted as an expression of a spiritual and often religious regeneration. The British critic Philip Melling has tried to read Vietnam War fiction in the light of the American Puritan tradition. In his perspective, the oxymoronic arrogant naivety of the Americans in Vietnam goes back to the desire to retrieve the

ancient "errand into the wilderness" (the regenerative spiritual journey into the wild lands), and to their certainty in a civilizing mission (the Manifest Destiny) which would distinguish the US from other countries, making the US truly "exceptional":

To the Puritan, testimony was an integral feature of the experience of errand and crucial determinant of the individual's right to membership in the church. The idea of making a private stand on public a mission – of testifying to one's own religious experience in front of the others – was regarded as a spiritual duty (Melling 1990: xiv).

In this perspective, the "will to testimony" shown by Caputo and other American writers should be interpreted as the self-understanding of the first generation ever of "new witnesses": "Those who have survived that experience and come to maturity because of it are the bearers of a special kind of knowledge that an older generation – and a civilian readership – do not possess" (Melling 1990: 60).

Melling's thesis is fascinating but runs the risk of reading all American culture through its white and religious tradition. If it is true that the myth of authenticity of the witness – as opposed to the bureaucratic language of the military and political hierarchy – draws heavily on the rhetoric of the Founding Fathers, it is very reductive to see the amazing success of the Vietnam stories as depending only on a spiritual-religious regeneration.

A better tool for understanding the Vietnam effort as a means of giving visibility to war and violence is the tentative concept of "possessive memory". According to Peter Braunstein, the 1960s Generation (the Baby Boomers) – as opposed to Generation X – has surrounded the memory of its youth experience with "barbed wire", in order to prevent others from sharing emotional or traumatic memories. Such a memory, which is intimately linked to the search for the "authentic self", would be shared by young people of different beliefs and with different experiences such as the Flower Children, the students who joined the Student Movement, the Vietnam veterans and the pacifists, and so on, that is, by individuals who had gone through a profound identification as a group.

This is a possible way of reading the extreme search of authenticity the veterans used to talk about and which they mention in most of their writings: if we limit the right to speak only to the witness –some kind of a new Ajax– who hides himself behind the ineffable nature of trauma, we bar any possibility of communication and any meditation on our recent past.¹¹ As I have tried to show elsewhere, there are some efforts – like those you can find in Tim O'Brien's very imaginative works (but one could also mention Robert Olen Butler's works, and in some respects even Stephen King's *Hearts in Atlantis*) – to avoid these aphasic mechanisms, which are historically understandable but psychologically and politically dangerous, not to say sterile.¹²

In conclusion, the narrative and thematic modes of most of the Vietnam War fiction are closer to the realistic-mimetic mode of which *A Rumor of War* is one of the most valuable examples, while Tim O'Brien is a very rare case of resistance against realism. We still have to answer the question of whether it is possible to reach the ethical aims of "the literature of witnesses". Caputo answers this question on the usefulness of his witnessing by referring to the didactic stance of Puritan autobiography: "It might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war", though he immediately adds: "But I don't think so" (Caputo 1977: xxi).

Should we believe him or is this simply a rhetorical device? By maintaining from the very first pages that witnessing is useless

paradoxically makes the role of the witness even more dramatic and urgent, and urges us to face it seriously, as if we were privileged readers: but the narration of history teaches us that the literal reading of his negation is correct. Making the war *visible*, even in its most atrocious aspects, does not prevent the next generation, to use Caputo's words, "from being crucified in the next war."

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2. Criticism on Caputo's *A Rumor of War* is quite extensive. See, among others: Styron 1977, Myers 1988, Beidler 1991, Spanos 2003. As for Caputo's self-reflexive statements, see Caputo 2000a and 2000b. [↵]
3. Since *A Rumor of War*, Caputo has published about 15 novels, none ever equalling the success of his first. In 1980 a mini-series with the same title and directed by Richard T. Heffron was produced and was a moderate success. [↵]
4. See on this point, Slotkin 1992: 519-20. [↵]
5. The two war movies cited by Caputo were famous ones directed by Allan Dwan (1949) and by Raoul Walsh (1955). [↵]
6. On the spectacularization in Crane's novel see Giorgio Mariani's excellent *Spectacular Narratives* (Mariani 1992). [↵]
7. On the Vietnam War and the media see Hallin 1986. [↵]
8. On the fascination of war and violence, see the extremely incisive pages in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (Herr 1977: passim). [↵]
9. I have discussed Tim O'Brien's self-reflexive tone in Rosso 2003a (especially in ch. 6 and 10). His complex thematization of the notion of courage (and much more) can be detected already in O'Brien 1973, and more clearly in O'Brien 1978 and 1990 (particularly in the short stories "On the Rainy River" and "Speaking of Courage"). [↵]
10. On the notion of "male bonding" and misogyny in Vietnam fiction, see Jeffords 1989 (passim) and Rosso 2003a (chs. 9-10) and Rosso 2003b. [↵]
11. The case of the Vietnam vets, or of any other vets for that matter, is complicated by the fact that they belong to a male group and that their withdrawal within that group (male bonding) involves problems of misogyny (for example, through the creation of a new jargon from which women and non-combatants are excluded). [↵]
12. On this, see again Rosso 2003a, especially ch. 10 (191-216). [↵]

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« [STORIA E FICTION: I TUNNEL DELLA GUERRA DEL VIETNAM REALISMO, BLACK HUMOR, EUFEMISMI E TURPILOQUIO NELLA NARRATIVA DELLA GUERRA DEL VIETNAM](#) »

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