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"The Blackest Kernel": Irony and the Poetics of Fear in Selected American Texts of the War in Vietnam

In the context of American culture, both popular and "highbrow," each major war the country has become involved in has been endowed with specific imageries and vocabularies in the various representations these conflicts continue to receive. True outliers, such as the anti-heroic *Catch-22*, are rare, and even then, they largely adhere to the realities of the material conditions, or material cultures, their wars both were fought in and, in turn, themselves produced. Elements of these conditions or cultures involve such down-to-earth matters as geographical locations, weaponry used, and the overall nature of the fighting.

But each war also becomes entangled with its discourses—about itself as much as about issues "surrounding" it—and its dominant metaphors. World War II, for example, while still being fought by the U.S. forces, was no more gallant, nor less gruesome and seemingly pointless as an "effective way" of killing young American men, than other conflicts[1]; after all, if we are to believe soldier memoirs and novels, the most patriotic rhetoric and sense of duty usually crumble in the face of the horrors of combat, and acts of heroism are usually motivated by hard-earned unit loyalty between brothers-in-arms rather than by lofty ideals. That World War II

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[1] See Paul Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade. American G.I.s in Europe: Chaos and Fear in World War Two* (London: Phoenix, 2005); Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

is now in the American memory associated with the notions of righteous war, patriotism, sacrifice, American greatness, and so forth, is mostly due to postwar reflection: on the true evil of the Nazis that was stopped, as well as on the more sentimental notion of "the Greatest Generation" in American cultural memory. The selectiveness of these inherited imageries, vocabularies, myths, and discourses is illustrated by, for example, the convenient cultural avoidance of the subject of the atomic bombs—an issue likened by Marianna Torgovnick to "the hole that […] completes the donut, necessary for the donut's shape," in reference to American cultural memory of the conflict[2]—or the forgetting of the fact that the de-facto victor and defeater of Hitler's Germany were the Soviets.

In the case of the war in Vietnam, its real-life imageries, as well as cultural metaphors and discursive interests, are familiar, too. The most memorable metaphor in this regard might very well be the view of the conflict as a "quagmire," an expression introduced by David Halberstam,[3] that developed into the self-absolutory narrative of the United States' entry into the war as a series of at least initially well-intentioned "mistakes" (as opposed to the more historically accurate narrative of a calculated "counterrevolutionary intervention"[4]). Unsurprisingly, the issues that the conflict's memory has continued to be embroiled in have also been its reputation as a "bad war" and the spectre of civil unrest: a war waged illegally and immorally, and/or unpopular at home. In the American and Americanised pop culture, the leading figure associated with the conflict, as well as its most worthy victim,[5] remains the American soldier and veteran. And, while these dominant discourses and metaphors remain exclusive, highly ideological, and often ahistorical, they do give testament to the major interpretations of the war in Vietnam in the United States and consequently allow us to investigate its continuing uses in various political and, again, ideological contexts.

Analogously, looking at certain recurring metaphors used in texts of culture about the Vietnam War provides us with greater insight as to the

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[2] Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 3.

[3] David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965).

[4] Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights, Volume II. After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina & the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), eBook, p. 1.

[5] On the concepts of "worthy" and "unworthy victims," see: Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), eBook, chapter 2.

conflict's "meanings." For example, literary and visual representations of fear, one of war's commanding emotions (at least as it concerns the rank-and-file), particular to the war in Vietnam, might help us unlock aspects of the soldier authors' experience that ultimately translate into a broader and further reaching commentary on the cultural conditions within which the conflict and its participants were embedded. Going forward, after providing some general background remarks regarding representations of fear in American films and books, I analyse a cluster of fear-related metaphors found across a number of literary texts, united by shared imagery as well as their emphasis on the significance of jokes and irony. To this end, I refer to Paul Fussell's classic study of the cultural memory of World War I as it was conveyed and preserved by the conflict's soldier-poets.[6] As we shall see, Fussell's claim of the centrality of irony to both war experience and literary encapsulations of it remains relevant to the war in Vietnam and its American literature; moreover, departing from Fussell's observations and comparing the visuals, fears, and ironies of the Great War (and, partly, World War II) to that of the Vietnam War proves particularly fruitful in locating the latter conflict's relationship to American (popular) culture.

Several distinct categories of the roots and conceptualisations of fear resurface in films about Americans in the Vietnam War; these categories tell us something about the films' philosophical and ideological cores. The quintessential 1980s genre of "Vietnam" movies was that stemming from the incredibly prevalent conspiracy theory—sometimes bundled under the umbrella term of the "POW/MIA issue"—according to which, after the war ended, hundreds, if not thousands, of American soldiers were left behind in Indochina in communist prisons run by the Hanoi government, with the knowledge and acquiescence of the White House. While these claims were never true, they did inspire the genre, whose greatest hits included the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series. There were two main sets of villains in these films: the evil communist captors who tortured encaged Americans, and the oily government and Pentagon representatives that worked to obscure the truth and to impede the buff protagonists' emancipatory actions. As such, these films responded to ideologically-motivated fears— amplified in the United States that was at the time fermenting under the

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[6] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

sway of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric—of communist savagery on the one hand, and disingenuous and suspect government agencies on the other.

In another category of Vietnam War films, one that can most generally be considered to include those of the movies that met with critical acclaim and were branded as more prestigious and more serious productions than those of the missing-in-action genre, the sources and visualisations of fear were different. While the films in question, such as the critic-favourite trio of *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*, display less generic dependence, a number of overlapping themes and images can be traced across them. As for the sources of fear, we can also distinguish between the "Vietnamese" and "American" ones. And, though these strategies of representation might seem less overtly political than their B-category counterparts, this is not to say they are not involved in ideological narratives, too. The Vietnamese sources of fear include, unsurprisingly, the enemy soldiers and guerrillas; on the American side, however, the issue becomes more complex and, in the end, the danger here is greater, as the films make use of what Katherine Kinney calls a "friendly fire" trope: the notion, realised in metaphors and narrative arcs, whereby during the war Americans, in fact, fought against *other* Americans, and so the whole point of the conflict was a matter of American inner tensions and soul searching.[7] We see this trope incarnated in such figures as Colonel Kurtz, a personified warning to Americans wishing to probe too deeply into the darkness of the frontier in *Apocalypse Now*; Animal Mother and other soldiers in Joker's unit who, by engaging in brutality as terrifying as it is spectacular, symbolise the raw psychopathy of the American war machine in *Full Metal Jacket*; and Sergeants Barnes and Elias (and their respective acolytes), entwined in a Manichean struggle between American indiscriminating evil and cool American good in *Platoon*.

Much of the canonical American literature of the war also engages in "friendly fire." But far more often than films, the novels and memoirs develop specific poetics to focus on the Vietnamese people as well as the Vietnamese landscape as agents of death and terror to American soldiers. The enemy, the North Vietnamese Army soldiers and Viet Cong fighters, are usually rendered invisible: the first keeping their massive battalions hidden

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[7] Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and unseen in the forests, the latter blending in with village populations so as to avoid detection. As such, these forces are routinely portrayed as spectral, i.e. ghosts, phantoms, or devils. In this literature, moreover, the enemy forces are usually virtually inseparable from the dangers of the land. They are the ones, after all, to plant the mines and booby traps that make the very ground of Vietnam treacherous; the shots of Vietnamese snipers come, surreptitiously, from the shadows of the jungle. As such, these particular strategies of representation serve the purpose of mythologising the country and land of Vietnam, naturalising war as its status quo, and rendering the Vietnamese as a feature of the deathly landscape—all these processes necessary to make the friendly fire trope viable by removing the actual historicity of the conflict and its native people to the backdrop of the intra-American drama.[8] The "Vietnam" thus constructed is the ever-lurking threat of death that propels and further dramatises the American stories and conflicts related to this war.

However, fear in the American literature of the war in Vietnam is also conceptualised in terms of the ironic nature of war. Paul Fussell begins his discussion of the topic by writing that "every war is ironic, because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its ends."[9] In his model of a soldier's experience translated into a literary text, Fussell proposes a tripartite structure. The soldier begins in a stage of innocence, in the case of the Great War, the pre-1914, pre-Remarque world full of notions of honour, of eagerness to serve for the glory of the crown (or the nation, or ideals), and so forth. This purity of spirit is quickly corrupted, however, and the lack of imagination quickly corrected by the realities of the battlefield. While the entirety of the time spent on the front constitutes a deeply transforming experience of war, Fussell also argues for the significance of moments of particular disillusionment, events momentous for each soldier involved; he singles out the Battle of the Somme in 1916 as just such an ironic "moment, one of the most interesting in the whole long history of human disillusionment."[10] After the war, Fussell then claims, when the soldier sits down to pen his poem, memoir or novel, he would

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[8] Aleksandra Musiał, *Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 50–119.

[9] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 8.

[10] Ibid., p. 31.

apply an "ironic pattern"[11] over the recollection to accentuate better the simultaneous loss of innocence and disillusionment experienced. The event thus becomes significant by its artistic reworking in the third, recollective and reflective, stage.

Fussell also extends his discussion to show that "the mechanism of irony-assisted recall"[12] applies to texts of World War II as well, citing Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* as prominent examples. In these texts, too, he argues, we find the protagonists experience their moments of disillusionment, realising that their inhuman suffering is endured in the name of goals that are of minuscule importance in comparison.[13] The nature of the irony also becomes clear; at its core, it resides in the horror that surmounts innocent expectations, and in literary terms is rendered as the haunting "dynamics of hope abridged," such as in the key scene of *Catch-22* in which Yossarian, at first confident in his training in first-aid procedures, attends to Snowden's wounds only to witness him die moments later.[14] The truth of the war is thus revealed to be subversive of those initial innocent expectations.

Fussell argues that the innocence preceding the Great War, and so the disillusionment that it eventually occasioned, were greater than in the case of any other war before or after because, since the beginning of the "virtually continuous war" in 1936, we have been "instructed in cynicism and draft-dodging."[15] However, I would argue that the war in Vietnam—which, incidentally, ended the same year, 1975, that Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* was published—was at the very least as ironic as World War I; in fact, Fussellian irony permeates representations of it. Throughout American Vietnam War literature, the figure by far most commonly evoked to convey the irony of the moments of disillusionment is John Wayne—his on-screen valour is often cited by soldier-authors as an early inspiration and object of fantasy—who soon enough came to symbolise the bitter disappointment with the Vietnam War specifically. Philip Caputo, who would be charged with the murder of Vietnamese civilians, joining the Marine Corps early in the war writes, "Already I saw

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 32.
[13] Ibid., p. 35.
[14] Ibid., p. 38.
[15] Ibid., p. 20.

myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest."[16] Other examples abound:

> [Shooting at the enemy,] I fought back passionately, in blind rage and pain, without remorse or conscience or deliberation. I fought back at […] the Pentagon generals, and the Congress of the United States, and *The New York Times*; […] at the Memorial Day parades and the daily Pledge of Allegiance […]; at the movies of John Wayne and Audie Murphy, and the solemn statements of Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara […]; at freedom and democracy and communism and the monumental stupidity with which I had delivered myself into the hands of the nightmare […].[17]

> There was no doubt that they had tricked us, deceived us—them with their John Wayne charging up Mount Suribachi, with their Gary Cooper-as-Sergeant York rounding up half the German Army and sharpshooting to death the other half. […] We had imagined a movie; we had envisioned a feast. What we got was a reality removed from all other realities; what we got was garbage pail.[18]

In Michael Herr's memoir *Dispatches*, much commentary is made on the impact of Wayne specifically, and on popular media in general, on the young men who decided to enlist as well as on the expectations of soldiers as to what combat would be like. In the end, Herr writes that the boys and men would soon find out that the war was

> not a movie, no jive cartoon either where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights, flattened out and frizzed black and broken like a dish, then up again and whole and back in the game, "Nobody dies," as someone said in another war movie.[19]

The ironic horror of the passage comes through when the reader realises that

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[16] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (London: Arrow Books), p. 6.

[17] W. D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine's Memoir* (New York: Zebra Books, 1989), pp. 342–343.

[18] Micheal Clodfelter, untitled work, in: *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years, 1941–1975*, compiled by John Clark Pratt (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 648.

[19] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1978), p. 44.

the cartoonishly grisly ways of non-dying [...] are actually some of the ways in which people did die in Vietnam: interrogated prisoners and suspects 'smacked around,' hooked up to radio batteries and field telephones by their genitals, thrown out of helicopters, and deliberately crushed by armored vehicles; U.S. soldiers torn apart by mines[20]

and, on rare gory occasions, accidentally run over by armoured vehicles belonging to their own forces[21]: "In Vietnam, it seems, everybody dies."[22]

John Wayne as a trope, aside from death, fear, and irony, plays a central role in representing the American experience of the war in *Dispatches*. Herr, who spent a year as a correspondent in Vietnam, recounts his own moment of ironic disillusionment: at first, after he had arrived in the country, he admits that the dead bodies he saw seemed to him detached from the reality of their deadness, used as he was to seeing violence and death on television and in movies[23]; the change came about when, during a firefight at the outset of the Tet Offensive, he was forced to pick up a gun and shoot at the enemy to assist the troops he was with: "I wasn't a reporter, I was a shooter."[24] Several years after he had returned from Vietnam, Herr writes, he had a dream in which he saw a field full of the dead of that fateful day, American and Vietnamese, and looked into their faces; when he woke up, he laughed.[25] Given that *Dispatches* may be read as an account of Herr's war trauma and its eventual reconciliation,[26] the laughter can be read as the author's recognition of the significance of irony in his reflective stage (third in Fussell's model). This would be the "mechanics of irony-assisted recall" at work, which provides Herr with another crucial piece of insight. Thinking now, years later, about the questions he used to be asked in Vietnam as to why he had decided to come there at all, Herr writes:

Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of

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[20] Musiał, *Victimhood*, p. 74.

[21] Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 153.

[22] Musiał, *Victimhood*, p. 74.

[23] Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 169.

[24] Ibid., p. 60.

[25] Ibid., p. 61.

[26] Mark Heberle, "Michael Herr's Traumatic New Journalism: *Dispatches*," in: *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, ed. Brenda Boyle (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 27–45.

course you've never heard it. […] The problem 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.[27]

But beyond his own personal experience, Herr's representation of American troops, marines in particular, makes perhaps the most effective use of irony in conjunction with the poetics of fear and death. His uneasy awareness of the nearly unbridgeable gap between himself—a reporter, an outsider, and a tourist in the war—and marines, initiated into the secrets of the land and the war, is ever-present in the book, and the moment of his becoming a shooter serves, if anything, only to accentuate it eventually. That other central figures in the book, such as fellow correspondent Sean Flynn, can attain the same level of initiation, but only at the cost of self-annihilation or engagement in the brutality of the land/war, testifies to the importance of this profound familiarity in *Dispatches*, and ultimately Herr's vision of the Vietnam War.

It is the marines that Herr portrays as the natural possessors of such an intimate knowledge of "Vietnam"—the knowledge which consists precisely in a profound understanding of death and the irony of the war. While he cannot gain access to it, or recognise his own understanding until he superimposes the "ironic pattern" on his own memory in the reflective stage, writing back, so to speak, he can glimpse it in the marines through their demeanour and language. Most importantly, the greatest extent of the knowledge imparted by the troops is in their jokes, ironic and descriptive of the tragic condition of the men who feel destined to die ("Eat the Apple, Fuck the Corps," "What's the difference between the Marine Corps and the Boy Scouts?" and so on).[28] For example, Herr writes of a song some "grunts" (infantrymen) composed, "a letter to the mother of a dead Marine, that went something like, 'Tough shit, tough shit, your kid got greased, but what the fuck, he was just a grunt.'"[29] The lyrics are meant to be funny because they ring true, because for the marines "something almost always went wrong somewhere, somehow. It was always something vague, unexplainable, tasting of bad fate, and the results were always brought down

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[27] Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 24.

[28] Herr, *Dispatches*, pp. 86–87; Musiał, *Victimhood*, pp. 84–85.

[29] Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 87.

to their most basic element—the dead Marine."[30] This is the knowledge of the war's secrets that the marines possess: "the madness, the bitterness, the horror and doom of it. […] They got savaged a lot and softened a lot, their secret brutalized them and darkened them and very often it made them beautiful," because they knew "where true violence resided."[31]

Writing about friendly fire, Kinney explains the meaning of the "fuck 'em if they can't take a joke" adage repeated by soldiers in Vietnam. According to her, it is "[a] catchphrase often used when some dreadful military tragedy is revealed. During the Vietnam War, it was most frequently used when friendly positions were accidentally bombed or shelled by our own troops."[32] As such, the saying could be a motto of Herr's tales of the marines as much as other literary texts of the war that make use of the secrecy-fear-death-irony cluster. A rather surprisingly common metaphor reoccurring in several books is that of a laughing skull, and, in all instances, it is used to comment on the secret knowledge imparted by war and death to still-living observers. In *Dispatches*, it is a "laughing lucent skull"[33]: "in back of every column of print about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an afterimage that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told."[34] The Marines know the meaning of the skull, its deadly irony: at one point, as they "laugh silently and long"[35] because Herr chooses to stay in a particularly dangerous place when he can simply leave instead, the author knows how to interpret the cheerless laughter: "it was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing."[36]

In other works, the laughing skull, or a smiling corpse, has the function of a *memento mori*, or a reminder that (the) war is deeply ironic—it always turns out "worse than expected," and no one expects to die. In his own memoir, Caputo writes about himself and other marines that they "were all victims of a great practical joke played on [them] by God or Nature. Maybe that was why corpses always grinned. They saw the joke at the last

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[30] Ibid., p. 86.
[31] Ibid., p. 87.
[32] Kinney, *Friendly Fire*, p. 113.
[33] Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 203.
[34] Ibid., p. 176.
[35] Ibid., p. 87.
[36] Ibid.

moment."[37] In Gustav Hasford's surreal novel *The Short-Timers*, to some extent inspired by *Dispatches*,[38] and in its turn the basis of the film *Full Metal Jacket* (*nota bene*, co-scripted by Herr), the trope returns several times. For example, Death wants to tell "a funny secret"[39] to the book's protagonist marines; elsewhere, the skull of a Vietnamese enemy displayed on a spike at a camp and affectionately referred to as Sorry Charlie by the Americans, is described thus: "The dark, clean face of death smiles at us with his charred teeth, his inflexible ivory grin. Sorry Charlie always smiles at us as though he knows a funny secret. For sure, he knows more than we do."[40] The content of the secret is revealed later, when the men discover a large group of civilians killed and buried in a mass grave by the North Vietnamese troops: the corpses "are grinning that hideous, joyless grin of those who have heard the joke, of those who have seen the terrible secrets of the earth."[41] Finally, the fates of war are such that the marines themselves must learn the secret, get the joke, hear Death out: in the novel's last scene, Joker, the narrator, and his squad are pinned down by a sniper deep in the jungle, when they hear an eerie sound and become mesmerised:

> The sniper is laughing at us. [...]
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> [T]he source of laughter is all around us. The laughter seems to radiate from jungle floor, from the jade trees, from the monster plants, from within our own bodies. [...]
>
> And I see Sorry Charlie, a black skull, perched on a branch [...].
>
> I laugh and laugh. The squad freezes with fear because the sniper is laughing with me. The sniper and I are laughing together and we know that sooner or later the squad will be laughing, too.
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> Sooner or later the squad will surrender to the black design of the jungle. We live by the law of the jungle, which is that more Marines go in than come out. There it is. Nobody asks us why we're smiling because nobody wants to know.[42]

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[37] Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, p. 231.

[38] The motto of the novel's first part, "The Spirit of the Bayonet," is a quotation from *Dispatches*; see the discussions in: Musiał, *Victimhood*, pp. 75, 87.

[39] Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books), p. 98.

[40] Ibid., p. 148.

[41] Ibid., pp. 126–127.

[42] Ibid., p. 175.

In the lethal environment of Vietnam, one that is made up of the country and the war as much as of the people and the land, the totality of it is intent on killing Joker and his buddies as much as the Vietnamese themselves. This, Hasford seems to be telling us, is the ultimate joke of Death and war working in tandem. Out there, deep in the jungle of Vietnam, the marines are saturated with their own deaths already, and no matter how much they might have thought themselves prepared, only the disillusioning moment of ironic realisation allows for internalisation of one's own likeliness of dying: this is the nature of War.

Let us now draw some shared conclusions from the discussion above. Even if Paul Fussell is right, and the innocence that was shattered by the Great War was purer than any other, the irony of the American war in Vietnam was no lesser: but the innocence broken then was a *simulation*. On the one hand, this is because the waging of the war was founded on so many lies, and the young American men sent to Indochina soon realised the emptiness lurking beyond their and their comrades' deaths. The America they were raised to believe in not only betrayed them but also turned out to be capable of extraordinary brutality against rural populations. On the other hand, the lessons of both world wars seemed to have been lost: the heroic depictions in war movies, the exalted rhetoric that praised the American soldier, and the capitalist- and nationalist-driven promotion of the United States as a purveyor of democracy and freedom. All the same, while the popular media, cinema and television especially worked to portray war as a noble, manly, and adventurous endeavour. Perhaps the irony of the war in Vietnam was double: "all wars are ironic," yes, but in this instance, as we look back, the innocences lost before Vietnam—including by the French, the Americans' direct predecessors in the country in both misguided strategy and final defeat—were already there to take heed of. In other words, the reality being unearthed by irony and itself undermining expectations had been laid bare long before the first American privates began losing lives. This is the tragedy of the American war's simulated naïveté: perhaps, in the end, it was no innocence at all, but a case of ignorance and amnesia.

The pre-war lull of Vietnam was made up of the notions of glory and duty, much like in the case of the Great War. But, in the triumphant aftermath of World War II, something of it was once again recovered in American culture, and the visceral horrors of combat and the scale of

suffering far surpassing any goal were disguised again, now as a John Wayne film or a colossal monument to the Marine Corps raising the U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi. Philip Caputo explained his decision to join the branch and volunteer to go to Vietnam:

> I had an uncle who had told me what the fighting had been like on Iwo Jima, an older cousin who had fought with Patton in France and who could hardly talk about the things he had seen. I had read all the serious books to come out of the World Wars, and Wilfred Owen's poetry about the Western Front. And yet, I had learnt nothing. […] So I guess every generation is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experiences, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own.[43]

But if this is true, just as their innocence did not end well for the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, so does this truth not bode well for our own future.

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"The Blackest Kernel": Irony and the Poetics of Fear in Selected American Texts of the War in Vietnam

This article discusses several American texts about the war in Vietnam, paying particular attention to Michael Herr's memoir *Dispatches* and Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*. Using Paul Fussell's model of the ironic pattern of war experiences recounted in literary texts authored by soldier-writers, the article argues that the close entanglement of the poetics of fear and a sense of Fussellian irony permeate the representations of the Vietnam War in these, as well as in other American books. The article also attempts to briefly categorise the representations of fear in several narratives of the war.

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[43] Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, p. 81.