Vietnam Goes Intermedia – Reconsidering Media Boundaries in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*

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1 Introduction: The Vietnam War In- and Outside Plato’s Cave

What does Plato have to do with the Vietnam War? To turn to a piece of philosophical writing from antiquity to approach a twentieth-century political event seems absurd. However, re-reading Plato’s *The Republic* with this aspect in mind opens up an illuminating perspective. His famous cave allegory in Book VII suddenly reads like a trenchant commentary on the splitting of the American people during the Vietnam era: soldiers experiencing the war first hand versus civilians following it via the media. To be more precise, those going to Vietnam left the cave to face reality; while those staying in the US lingered in the cave’s darkness with nothing but representations of reality. It almost goes without saying that this dichotomy implies the primacy of the former over the latter, for whom “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of images” (Plato 42). Aligning the experience of war with the “beatific vision” portrayed in Plato (45) – which is to equate the soldier with the philosopher – would certainly be over the top. Yet, the inherent hierarchy of contrasting the “uninformed of the truth” (ibid. 47) with those who have been to “the world of knowledge” (ibid. 44) can be discovered in much Vietnam writing – “there exists within the cultural production of Vietnam a privileging ... of personal experience, of ‘Having Been There, Man’” (Bonn 208).

Though being in fact applicable to virtually any other war, this binarism of firsthand war experience versus mediated knowledge thereof is particularly characteristic of the Vietnam War. Dubbed “living-room war” (Arlen 6), it was typified by an unlevelled omnipresence of mass media, taking events from ‘in-country’ to the ‘home front.’ American living rooms were flooded with images of war; just as if a thousand objects were passing by the fire behind the prisoners in the cave. Most aptly, the term used in Plato to describe the wall on which these shadows are cast translates as “screen” (41), which in the modern reader inevitably evokes the idea of a TV screen. Albeit written millennia before this invention, it reads like an ancient prophecy of a (post)modern phenomenon: The 1960s see an outpouring of visual representations of war, “introduc[ing] the home front to a new tele-intimacy with death and destruction” (Sontag 21). According to McLuhan, this type of mass mediated war means “the end of the dichotomy between civilian and military” – that is between in- and outside Plato’s cave – since “the main actions of the war are now being fought in the American home itself” (*Global* 134).

Precisely this standpoint – in its contradiction to the above indicated insistence “that the [civilian] reader is powerless to understand Vietnam” (Melling 6) – raises the questions that loom large in the background of this thesis: How do mass media and reality interact when it comes to Vietnam? Do modern media representations substitute firsthand experience? Or will the ‘real war,’ to echo Whitman, never get on screen? Finally, how do preconceived media images change the perception of those who actually come to face war? With these larger issues in mind, the present paper examines the significance of mass media in one of the key texts of American Vietnam literature: Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977). As the subtitle suggests, the essence of this study lies in reconsidering media boundaries, both *between media and literature* and *between media and reality*. In so doing, the concept of intermediality will serve as the theoretical framework through which the primary text is to be read and analyzed. Against this backdrop, the overall objective is to demonstrate how the intermedial dimension of *Dispatches* functions as a deconstructive means within the text. Not only transgressing existing media boundaries but also blurring the underlying reality-representation-binarism, it emphasizes the work’s ever recurring *leitmotif* of in-between and calls into question any rigid categories.

To get to these results, a brief introduction to the field of intermediality – delineating its history (2.1), its heterogeneity (2.2), and its relevance for literary studies (2.3) – will be provided as a point of departure. Building up on that, the overall intermedial potential of *Dispatches* will be outlined (3), before a close-reading of selected passages brings into focus one particular type of intermediality, consisting of the thematization (4.1) and the imitation (4.2) of various mass media. Subsequently, a conclusion will serve as a review section which places the previous findings within a broader context and links them back to the opening thought: Does intermediality in *Dispatches* eventually work towards unifying or distancing the soldier on the front and the civilian at home? Or, allegorically speaking, does it subvert or substantiate the dichotomy of in- *versus* outside Plato’s cave? (5).

2 Theory in the Making – The Concept(s) of Intermediality

Despite evolving as “a buzzword in academic discourse in the 1990s” (Stein 181), *intermediality* – as a term and discipline – still has to be considered as work in (rapid) progress. In 1992, Ulrich Weisstein notes that “we are still far from possessing a scholarly *instrumentarium* suited for handling interdisciplinary problems with methodological rigor, much less with a sure grasp of their theoretical implications” (1, original emphasis); fifteen years later, Maddalena Punzi finds that *intermediality*, though “gaining ground in the crowded panorama of contemporary critical jargon,” is still a term “whose semantic field has not been thoroughly defined” (10); and it is only very recently that Jürgen E. Müller observes that “in spite of all attempts to draft a self-contained body of theory, intermediality research at present does not possess a coherent system which would allow a grasp of all intermedia phenomena” (“Digital” 16). In short: If the diverse voices in the field of intermediality can agree on one thing, it is the fact that the concept still lacks demarcation. Due to this reason, but also to the limited scope of this paper, the following chapter does not endeavor to present an all-encompassing panorama of intermediality¹ but rather to offer a glimpse into this complex and still maturing concept.

2.1 Horace’s Long Shadow: A Concise History of Intermediality

If intermediality is largely understood to be a relatively young discipline, then why can one hardly open a book on this field without coming across texts that date back to the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth century and further? While intermediality as such is a phenomenon that has only rather recently begun to be discussed in academic discourse, the issues that lie at its heart seem to have concerned mankind since anti-quity: From Horace’s ‘*ut pictura poesis*,’ via Leonardo’s *paragone* to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Lessing’s *Laokoon*, questions of various art forms, their respective strengths and weaknesses, and their interplay with one another have been a matter of discussion (cf. Heusser 11f; Wolf, *Musicalization* 2ff). In this long-standing tradition of inter-artistic comparison, the notion of competitiveness, rather than of collaboration, between different media has always played a central role. Inextricably linked to this issue was the idea of high *versus* low art; the question of “Kunstwürdigkeit” (Moninger 8).

Only with the ushering of post-modernism did this line begin to blur. Scholars and writers increasingly acknowledged that “what had been seen as a threat [could]

¹ Comprehensive works that map out the broad territory of intermediality include *Intermedialität. Theorie und Praxis eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebiets* (1998) by Jörg Helbig, *Forschungsüberblick “Intermedialität”* (2000) by Mathias Mertensand, and most recently, Jürgen E. Müller’s *Media Encounters and Media Theories* (2008) as well as Joachim Paech’s and Jens Schröter’s *Intermedialität – Analog/Digital* (2008). The two that have been met with the most universal approval in literary studies, and which will serve as central points of reference throughout this paper, are the oft-quoted texts by Werner Wolf (most notably *The Musicalization of Fiction* (1999)) and by Irina O. Rajewsky (especially *Intermedialität* (2002)).

also be understood as an interesting source of new artistic possibilities aiming at enriching all cultural forms rather than leveling them” (Allué 145). In the 1960s, American *Fluxus* artist Dick Higgins claims that “[m]uch of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media” (49). “[W]e are approaching the dawn of a classless society,” he explains, “to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant” (ibid.). Contradicting “Medienpuristen” (Moninger 9) and conventionally drawn media boundaries, Higgins coins² the term *intermedia* in his same-named 1965 essay (cf. Preuss 17ff). While during the 70s, academic attention is drawn to another ‘big word’ – *intertextuality* – the idea of intermedia is only brought (back) to discussion in 1983 by Aage A. Hansen-Löve. His article³ takes it beyond the confines of art criticism and is usually considered the birth hour (cf. Winkelmann 18; Eicher 11) of the “ubiquitous catchword which came onto the scene in the 1990s” (Rajewsky, “Literary” 43): *intermediality*.

The twenty-first century, then, as Werner Wolf finds, shows “a marked tendency towards intermediality ... which is so apparent that one is inclined to add yet another ‘turn’” (*Musicalization* 2). In the same vein, Maddalena Punzi speaks of “the transition from the ‘Gutenberg Age’ to the ‘Age of Intermediality’” which “is marked by the move from a monocentric to a polycentric type of logic; ... the logic of the network” (11). Indeed, it hardly comes as a surprise that the current explosion of New Media fuels and complicates the debate on intermediality to an unforeseen degree; “every new media technology rewrites the history of its predecessor, but the computer is on the verge of rewriting the entire history of media technology – and hence of media theory” (Winthrop-Young 189). In a time when books can be downloaded from the internet and read on an e-paper display, media boundaries have automatically become obscured: “The computer monitor is the place where the arts become indistinguishable” (Paech, “Artwork” n. pag.). Yet, or rather because of this fact, the questions that have already occupied early thinkers remain pressing to this day: What exactly constitutes the difference between media, can these boundaries be crossed and, if so, how, why, and with what effect? These are the conundrums that drive the present paper and that unite a plurality of different approaches now being practiced under the broad heading of *intermediality*.

2.2 Inter-media(-)lity, a *termine ombrellone*

In trying to determine the meaning of a complex term, it is often helpful to take a look at its distinct components. In the case of *intermediality*, however, this means to open a can of worms. While the Latin prefix *inter-* is quite readily translated into *between*, things get much more difficult with the second part, *-media-*. In general, the understanding of the word *medium* ranges from a very narrow notion (medium as a

² In fact, the term goes back to Coleridge and the year 1812 (cf. Schröter 129, Oosterling 35) as Higgins later acknowledged (cf. “Origin of Happening.” *American Speech* 51.3 (1976): 268-271).

³ “Intermedialität und Intertextualität. Probleme der Korrelation von Wort- und Bildkunst” (*Dialog der Texte: Hamburger Kolloquium zur Intertextualität*. Sonderband 11, Wien 1983: 291-361).

physical transmitter of data or information, such as a CD), to a very broad notion (medium as “any extension of ourselves” (McLuhan, *Understanding* 7), including books as much as wheels or clothes). The *OED* requires almost 8000 words⁴ to explain the etymology, development and countless different usages of medium, demonstrating how eclectic this term alone already is.⁵ In *intermediality*, the suffix *-lity* further complicates matters. *Mediality* brings in the aspect of materiality which has increasingly been included in recent scholarly debates on media. Though voices diverge on this issue, the consensus is that “even when they seek to make themselves invisible, media are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports ... whose materiality, precisely, ‘matters’ for the type of meanings that can be encoded” (Ryan 2). Broadly put, *intermediality* – as a whole – is a term supposed to describe something in between media; “ein Hyperonym für die Gesamtheit all jener Phänomene ... [die] in irgendeiner Weise zwischen Medien anzusiedeln sind” (Rajewsky, “Light” 31).

Within this very general frame, a plethora of different definitions has been put forward, which – as those of medium – oscillate between a wide and a rather narrow conception. Given the complexity of the term and the heterogeneity of approaches it brings forth, Irina Rajewsky rightly calls intermediality a “termine ombrellone,” a term which comprises even more aspects than an umbrella term (*Intermedialität* 6)⁶. Some approaches focus on the aspect of translation from one medium to another, regarding intermediality as the “movement of the message through a system of interrelated but different media” (Oosterling qtd. in Punzi 10); making a novel into a film, for instance. Most aptly, Roger Fidler terms this process “mediamorphosis” (xv). Other studies investigate the interplay of different media when being combined in one work, such as image and text in a comic book. Here, intermediality is understood as “Vermischung zwischen unterschiedlichen Medien [bis hin zu deren] Verschmelzung zu einer neuen Form” (Spielmann 79).⁷ A similarly text-centered approach is to view intermediality as “a kind of intertextuality which entails the crossing of artistic border lines” (Weisstein 3). In this case, references in a work of one medium to a work of another medium are of interest, as, for example, a song referring to a film or *vice versa*.

All of these perspectives belong, to use Rajewsky’s distinction, to the second of the “two poles structuring the intermediality debate”: They approach intermediality “as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products” (“Literary” 47). By contrast, intermediality can also be seen as a more

⁴ As per August 10th 2011.

⁵ Joachim Paech offers a brief but well-informed answer to “The Question of the Medium,” as the chapter heading runs, in his essay “Artwork – Text – Medium. Steps *en route* to Intermediality.”

⁶ In a footnote, Rajewsky explains that in Italian, the suffix *-one* indicates a larger unit; in this case, a (larger) sun shade, *ombrellone*, instead of a (smaller) umbrella, *ombrello* (cf. *ibid.*)

⁷ Sometimes this phenomenon is also referred to as *multimodality* or *hybridization*; to get into these (and other) alternative terms and their intersections with – or differences from – intermediality would, however, lead too far here. For basic thoughts on that matter, see Müller, “Konzept” 31f; Moninger 9; or Rajewsky, “Light” 29f.

general and more complex cultural phenomenon, based on an understanding which “concentrates on intermediality as a fundamental condition or category” (ibid.). This kind of “Ur-Intermedialität” (146), as Jens Schröter calls it, is not an idiosyncrasy of individual works but is a transmedial “characteristic of *all* practices of cultural production and reception” (Sielke 157, emphasis added). As such, it also refers to “the constant exchange between old and new media” (Punzi 12). Seen from this perspective, intermediality is a process, rather than a state, which is closely linked to technological progress and cultural change – “Intermedialität ist ein Seismograph kultureller Umbrüche” (Hörner, Neumeyer & Stiegler 12).

At first sight, the two outlined poles appear to be contradictory; at second sight, however, they are in fact two sides of the same coin that merely operate on different levels. Whether we consider the artifact itself as intermedial or our culture as a whole, does not matter after all, since the former can be seen as the manifestation of the latter, or the latter as the outcome of the former; a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma. Thus, the crux of the matter lies in the perspective one chooses and the epistemological goals one pursues in dealing with intermediality. Without a doubt, intermediality has to be understood as a dynamic, not a static, concept that keeps changing with the advancement of technology but also with the respective discipline in which it is being used.

2.3 Intermediality + Literary Studies = Mutual Illumination?

“Intermedialität ist in!” declares Joachim Paech in 1998 (“Intermedialität” 14). However, intermediality was at first received with reserve rather than enthusiasm by the academic audience.⁸ One major reason for this might be its interdisciplinary nature. As W.J.T. Mitchell explains in 1995, “[t]he field of literary studies encounters visual culture [in general] with a similar kind of ambivalence: It is not quite sure why textual scholars should suddenly be looking at visual arts and media” (“Interdisciplinarity” 542). Interestingly, it is the (age-old) idea of media rivalry that we find between the lines of early reactions to intermediality – “does the technological revolution spell the death of the book?” (Punzi 12) and, analogously, does intermediality supplant literary studies? Concerns like this may have caused hesitation towards intermediality studies but are, as Werner Wolf argues, entirely ungrounded: Quite the opposite, intermediality is a way of “(re)-affirm[ing] the flexibility, openness and adaptability of a verbal medium which some fear to be a loser in the present competition with the non-print media” (*Musicalization* 2).

⁸ It is to note here that there is a marked difference between Continental European and British/US-American discourse. Since the interest in media and materiality is, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht phrases it, “a specifically German phenomenon” (173), it is here that scholars have rather quickly absorbed and refined the notion of intermediality for literary studies, with Rajewsky and Wolf leading the way. Meanwhile, the English-speaking world (with the exception of Canada) would largely disregard the new-born term until quite recently and has still not ‘caught up’ with the current state of research in Germany or Europe.

Even while disciplinary boundaries have become increasingly porous, Mitchell's observation remains largely valid; "transdisciplinarity, as we know, is [still] no easy matter" (Sielke 157). Since "[i]ntermediality research by definition integrates [at least] two scholarly fields, whereas scholars in the majority of cases ... are experts in one field only" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 6), the somewhat pragmatic problem of incompetence with the non-literary remains. In the long run, this can only change, if the skepticism for the unknown is turned into curiosity. What literary scholars need to accept, once and for all, is that intermediality is not a foreign discipline but that it is actually part of literary studies *per se* – "it ha[s] simply become unacceptable to see 'media' as isolated monads" (Müller, "Digital" 18). As a specific ingredient of culture, intermediality is precisely not non-literary. By contrast, it is maybe the only way to come to a full understanding of contemporary literature in its multi-layered resonance of the growing media saturation of our post-modern age. Obviously, "where there has been a change from print culture to electronic culture, the role and form of literature is due to evolve" (Allué 147); and accordingly, that of literary studies. Today more than ever, "intermediality studies ... neither add 'alien' matter to the study of literature nor deflect attention away from literature, but shed a most illuminating light on it" (Wolf, "Relevance" 20).

3 The Intermedial Potential of *Dispatches*

"It was the same familiar violence, only moved over to another medium" (Herr, *Dispatches* 209) – these are the simple but expressive words which motivated the present paper. Not only including the all-important signal word – *medium* – but also bringing it into relation with first-hand experience of Vietnam, this sentence inevitably turns the spotlight on the intricate interplay of war, media, and reality. Once attention is drawn to this matter, the preceding 200 (and remaining 50) pages of *Dispatches* appear in a new light. The more one (re-)reads, the more one realizes that this one sentence in fact contains the whole book *en miniature*; and the less one understands how it – the passage and the topic – could receive such disproportionately little attention within the literature on *Dispatches*. Reading it as a book about Vietnam, studies largely revolve around war-related topics such as trauma, gender, violence, mythmaking, etc.⁹ Reading it as a book about writing about Vietnam, others are concerned with more general topics, such as postmodernism, self-reflexivity, or autobiography.¹⁰ What both approaches seem to share, however, is their lack of thorough critical attentiveness to the significance of media.

⁹ As a small selection, see for example E. Carton's "Vietnam and the Limits of Masculinity" (*American Literary History* 3:2. 294-318), J. Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, esp. chapter V (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), T. Hawkins' "Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*" (*War, Literature & the Arts* 21 (2009): 129-143) and D. Ringnalda's *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1994).

¹⁰ Among others, "The Unspeakable Language of Life and Death in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*" (M. Van Deusen, *Critique* 24.2. 82-87), "Subverting Autobiography: War, Narrative, and Ethics in Mi-

If media become a topic, it is commonly confined to a strictly literary or maybe socio-historical scope, focused on the level of content not of form; and, on top of that, mostly limited to print media. Although references to other media, such as rock 'n' roll music or movies, keep reappearing, they are usually only addressed on the side, within the framework of one of the above mentioned overarching issues, rather than being the actual matter of interest. Self-consciously media-focused studies on *Dispatches* are scarce; intermediality-focused approaches are, to my knowledge, non-existent thus far. While there are certainly examples within the literature that hint at intermedial facets of Herr's work, they do not label and not even understand them as such. To bring all these findings together, reassess them in the light of intermediality and use them as a basis for a more detailed analysis of the book's intermedial dimension is one of the major goals of the present paper. In so doing, it is an attempt maybe not to fill but at least to point towards this gap in the existing body of research.

Undeniably – compared to other literary examples, such as William Blake's visual poems or Jonathan Safran Foer's experimental novels – *Dispatches*' potential for an intermedial reading is not as evident at first sight and is therefore easily overlooked; yet, it exists. In fact, the intermedial nature of Herr's work already begins with its genesis. While what we are now holding in our hands as *Dispatches* is clearly a book, parts of it have originally been published as articles in the American magazines *Rolling Stone* (1977: "LZ Loon," which coincides with the book's ending), *Esquire* (1969: "Hell Sucks") and *New American Review* (1971: "Illumination Rounds"). Though many secondary sources mention this origin, none of them makes an effort to go into more detail: How does the format interact with the narrative? Does the presence of a photograph supplement to or distract from the text? In how far does our perception of a four-page article in a magazine – positioned, for example, between a record commercial and the home story of a rock band, as in the November 1977 issue of *Rolling Stone* – generally differ from that of a coherent 260-page hardcover book? These are distinctly intermedial questions, which could put a new complexion to an understanding of *Dispatches*, but have remained without reply.

Depending on the definition of medium one uses, this peculiar publication history could already be seen as a form of 'mediamorphosis,' from one kind of print medium to another. Similarly, the book later served as an important source for the screenplay of Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*; another intermedial aspect of *Dispatches* which has repeatedly been brought up but never thoroughly thought through. Having already proceeded through the media circuit – from journalism to literature to film – for more than thirty years, Herr's work has only recently been published as an audio book.¹¹ Listening to the story again turns

chael Herr's *Dispatches*" (M. Lau, *Life Writing* 6.2. (2009): 193-210), and "It Don't Mean Nothin': Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism" (L. Carpenter, *College Literature* 30.2 (2003): 30-50) can be named as interesting examples.

¹¹ *Dispatches* (1977). Unabridged. Read by Ray Porter. 7 CDs, 8.5hrs. Blackstone Audio, 2009.

Dispatches into a completely new experience: The discs' data capacity structures the text; the reading (listening) speed is prescribed by the narrator; the pitch and volume of the voice, the tone, the stress, the American accent, and the mimicry of other voices now become new stylistic means – alterations which can decisively influence the effect of the original (written) story.

Though all of these facets are not exactly part of *Dispatches* (the book), they still can open up a new and enlightening perspective on it. By entering into dialogue with one another, the various versions stress the relevance of the (differing) medium for the (same?) message. Drawing on the three-partite subdivision of intermediality, which Irina Rajewsky suggests (cf. *Intermedialität* 20f; or "Remediation" 51f) and which is met with widespread approval, all of the outlined aspects fall into the category of *medial transposition* (*Medienwechsel*). This type, as has just been shown, describes the interplay of various 'texts' – namely, one work in diverse media – rather than the characteristic of just one. By contrast, the second form that Rajewsky distinguishes, that of *media combination* (*Medienkombination*), designates the phenomenon of one artifact comprising (at least) two different media. As most conceptions of intermediality, this one is especially dependent on which definition of medium one chooses.

Sticking to a definition that is strongly bound to materiality, *Dispatches* – materially clearly consisting of just one medium – could hardly be identified as intermedial in this second sense. Drawing the media line between text and image, for example, the (material) combination of media in *Dispatches* does not extend the realm of what Gerard Genette would simply label "paratext" (23ff): book jacket design, cover illustration, author photograph, period. Treating different genres of writing as different media, however, makes the intermedial dimension of *Dispatches* indisputable: One of the most prominent features of Herr's work is that its "genre ... recalcitrantly refuses determination" (Spanos 185f); it blends fact and fiction, literature and journalism, to a degree in which they almost become indistinguishable. Yet, this generic border crossing has not been acknowledged as a crossing of media boundaries. While a considerable amount of importance has been attached to the matter of New Journalism, for example, it is mostly looked at as a new – literary – genre, and discussed with regard to questions of mimesis or subjectivity rather than of merging different media. Likewise, the ways in which *Dispatches* dismisses conventional journalism and literary realism, on the one hand; and struggles to establish itself against canonical war literature, on the other, have hardly ever been understood in terms of media rivalry. In fact, however, the motif of competing (print) media – most notably in the countless self-referential passages – runs as a constant subtext through *Dispatches*. The literary status of Herr's work, which critics tend to take for granted, is itself already the outcome of "a paragone, a struggle, a contest" (Cheeke 21) between different media.

To put it in a nutshell: The intermedial potential of *Dispatches* is almost inexhaustible. Whatever the reason why "those who have written the big word of 'intermediality' on their banners" (Gumbrecht 177) have not discovered *Dispatches* as

a valuable source, yet, it is certainly not that the text does not allow for it. Though well aware of its existence, the paper at hand can, for reasons of space, not exploit this potential to the fullest. Therefore, the above indicated aspects of media combination and media transformation will not be examined in any more depth but have to be understood as pointers towards a research niche which certainly merits closer scrutiny. Instead, the focus of the following text analysis shall be placed on a third type of intermediality: *intermedial references* (*Intermediale Bezüge*). In Werner Wolf's terms – who labels the same phenomenon “covert” intermediality – this type is to be understood as:

[the] involvement of (at least) two conventionally distinct media in the signification of an artefact in which, however, only one (dominant) medium appears directly with its typical or conventional signifiers, the other one (the non-dominant medium) being only indirectly present. (“Revisited” 44)

Applying this definition to *Dispatches*, the sole ‘dominant’ medium would be literature (even if this designation is, as has been indicated, to some extent simplified in that it does not entirely do justice to its roots in journalism). Which media exactly constitute the ‘non-dominant’ part of *Dispatches* and in which ways they contribute to its signification shall be enlarged upon in the following close-reading.

4 A Mass Media Sensitive Close-Reading of *Dispatches*

As has been briefly outlined in the introduction to this paper, the Vietnam War – as well as its remembrances and representations – is inextricably linked to the advancement of mass media that has accompanied the 1960s.¹² Accordingly, mass media, instead of more traditional media, form the center of attention in the present text analysis. To be more precise, the focus will be on audio, visual and audiovisual media, which have been given comparatively little weight in the research done on *Dispatches*: (rock) music, photography, and film. Identifying these three as mass media may appear inadequate in that this label undermines their status as serious art forms. However, it is not to be forgotten that at the time of the book's genesis (in the 1960s) and publication (in the 1970s), these media were not yet as highly acknowledged as today. On top of that, it is precisely their role as widely received mass media products, their being part of ‘*the* (American) media,’ which is of significance for the purpose of this paper.

Obviously, all three of the selected media are not materially, but only ‘indirectly’ present in Herr's work. Yet, they are an integral part thereof which has a

¹² For further reading, see for example chapter four of Gerhard Paul's *Bilder des Krieges, Krieg der Bilder: die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges* (2004), which also includes an interesting passage on German TV coverage of the Vietnam War (cf. 321f).

not-to-be underestimated impact on how *Dispatches* affects us and on the message(s) it conveys. Correspondingly, the following close reading shall demonstrate, to borrow Werner Wolf's concise definition of intermediality, that "more than one medium of expression [participates] in the sense-making of" *Dispatches* (*Musicalization* 2). To do so, it shall be differentiated, in the first place, between what the work is about – its content – as distinct from how it mediates this content – its form. Put otherwise, the first part of the analysis will be concerned with intermediality IN *Dispatches*, having a closer look at crucial passages in which different mass media are being *thematized* (4.1); whereas the second part deals with intermediality OF *Dispatches*, discussing the various ways in which the work *imitates* the three given mass media (4.2).

4.1 Thematization of Mass Media: Intermediality within *Dispatches*

For the first half of the textual analysis, attention will be given exclusively to what Wolf calls "quasi-intertextual intermediality" (*Musicalization* 47) or "intermedial thematization" ("Relevance" 30).¹³ More precisely, intermediality is to be understood, for the moment, as a sort of "popkulturelles Verweissystem" (Wagner 243) – a framework of mass cultural references within *Dispatches*. Reference here means the explicit mentioning of another medium; either in the form of an "individual reference" (*Einzelreferenz*) – mentioning a specific work – or in the form of a "system reference" (*Systemreferenz*) – referring to the medium as a whole (cf. Rajewsky, "Remediation" 53). This "mere thematization" of other media (ibid. 54) is often overlooked or even explicitly denied as being an intermedial phenomenon. Mirroring its marginalization in the academic debate, Yvonne Spielmann dismisses this subcategory of intermedial references as nothing but a 'light-version' of intermediality (cf. Rajewsky, "Light" 43). Without disputing that there may be more intense or experimental forms of intermediality, the following pages shall demonstrate that also this one – "die bloße Thematisierung des Altermedialen" (ibid. 30) – deserves critical attention. In so doing, the specific media under scrutiny are, as already mentioned, (rock) music, photography, and film. To what extent do these three media become a topic in *Dispatches* and with what effect?

Thematizing (Rock) Music

One does not read far into *Dispatches* before coming across the first reference to rock music: "Page took the kid's picture, I got the words down and Flynn laughed and told him we were the Rolling Stones" (*D*¹⁴ 7). A seemingly insignificant joke, this early passage already reveals, at a closer look, a few interesting aspects with regard to intermediality. First of all, this simple sentence brings together at least

¹³ For a detailed chart showing Wolf's complete systematization of all forms of intermediality, see for example *Diagramm 2: System intermedialer Formen* (178) in his essay "Intermedialität: Ein weites Feld und eine Herausforderung für die Literaturwissenschaft."

¹⁴ *Dispatches* will be abbreviated to the letter *D* in all following parenthetical references.

two – visual (“picture”) and verbal (“words”) – if not three – including aural (“Rolling Stones”) – different media. These are, moreover, linked to specific persons, which is an idea that keeps recurring with regard to other characters in later chapters. Unsurprisingly, Herr is ‘responsible’ for writing and photographer Tim Page for visually documenting the situation. The interplay of different people is indirectly aligned with the interplay of different media; as if each means of representation captures one fragment of the whole action. On top of that, the ‘action’ itself is of interest with regard to media here: a commander mistakes the three colleagues for members of the *USO* (the ‘entertainment unit’) “‘cause [their] hair’s so long” (ibid.) what then triggers Flynn’s joke. This implies, first of all, the setting apart of the (long-haired) correspondents from the (shaved headed) soldiers; and second, the representation of rock music as the *anathema* to military conformity and to the Vietnam War itself. In short, even the most inconspicuous reference to music (of which there are countless in *Dispatches*) can have far-reaching implications, which are easily overlooked. In general, the best way to group these various passages is by their function for the overall text.

Referring to the latter-mentioned role of rock music as mouthpiece of the anti-war subculture, it can be said that among the manifold functions of thematizing music in *Dispatches*, one is evidently of political nature. Through including references to songs and artists known for their outspokenly critical view on war, Herr¹⁵ lends them tacit approval; indirectly agreeing by not disagreeing. Likewise, the seemingly neutral remark – that he “never once heard [this kind of music] played over the Armed Forces Radio Network” (D 182) – turns into an implicit reproach of censorship; and Tim Page’s plan – to “rig loudspeakers around the Lower House ... and play the freakiest music he could find as loud as the equipment would permit” (D 238) – into political protest. The depiction of rock music as “the in-country counterculture of the war” (Fish 390), becomes unmistakably clear when Herr recalls “the grunts who sat in a circle one night with a guitar, singing ‘Where Have All The Flowers Gone?’” (D 148). In other words, Herr finds a subtle way to create an ongoing political commentary without losing his work’s ‘apolitical’ surface to a morally didactic tone; he lets music(ians) speak for him.

On top of providing a subversive counterpart to the government’s view on the war, the continuous references to rock music also serve as a break with the readers’ (genre) expectations. Incorporating allegedly ‘low art’ in a book, a medium considered ‘high art,’ challenges this very dichotomy. When the words of Frank Zappa are being mentioned in the same breath as those of renowned *literati* as Hemingway or Blake, it lends weight to the former as much as it debunks the latter. The same holds true, for example, for choosing lyrics by Bob Dylan as the opening quote of a chapter (cf. D 209). Standing representative for the coming of “younger generations [who] do not even perceive, let alone acknowledge, a priority of the written

¹⁵ I am, of course, oversimplifying matters here by using ‘Herr’ to refer to the narrator, the character and the author alike. I do so for pragmatic reasons of brevity and clarity but with full awareness of the intricate narratological interplay of these three instances.

word over other semiotic systems” (Punzi 11), Vietnam is depicted as a place where the categorization into high and low art has been dissolved or even reversed – “a war where a lot of people talked about Aretha’s ‘Satisfaction’ the way other people speak of Brahms’ Fourth” (D 181).

In the same passage, another function of references to rock music becomes apparent: giving a voice to the soldiers. “This music [Jimi Hendrix] meant a lot to them,” Herr writes (*ibid.*), showing an awareness of, as well as a genuine interest in, the soldiers’ inner life and thus depicting them in an unusually humane and individualized way. For them, “sounds were as precious as water” (D 234), it is later repeated, presenting music as a fundamental human drive. An essential need of theirs, the consumption of rock music is repeatedly aligned with the soldiers’ other few pleasures, such as drug use (cf. D 8, 239, 245), food (cf. D 109) and sex (cf. D 38, 248). “These songs served as a strategy for survival,” Lydia M. Fish finds with regard to the Vietnam War in general; “as a means of unit bonding and definition, as entertainment, and as a way of expressing emotion” (391). Accordingly, David E. James is right in stating that “Herr’s breaking of the convention of overlooking rock’s preoccupation of the soldiers’ imagination is intrinsic to his project of telling the soldiers’ own stories rather than continuing the misrepresentation of the war by the military and the administration” (84).

Early in the book, a sergeant is described who “chain-ate candy bars and played country-and-western tapes” (D 13). Implying that this was the music genre that is being enjoyed by those of a higher grade, country music serves as the counterpart to rock ‘n’ roll. With equal suggestiveness, Tim Page later asks: “[W]ould Ellsworth Bunker¹⁶ like the Mothers of Invention¹⁷?” and would “William C. Westmoreland¹⁸ dig the Mothers?” (D 238). Left unanswered these questions seem even more rhetorical, the answer most self-evidently being: ‘No!’ Of course, references to rock music in *Dispatches* can be seen as an element of verisimilitude, since such music *was* part of the Vietnam experience. However, it was only (or mostly) so for the US soldier; not so much for the generals and officers. Rock music belongs to the war as the ‘grunts’ – and with them Herr – experienced it; it was “part of life in the combat zone” (Fish 390). Hence, its ubiquitousness in *Dispatches* not only mirrors its actual role in Vietnam but also puts the reader in the shoes of those for whom it was of immense importance – the soldiers.

This effect is further intensified by the choice of songs. All of them released in the mid- to late 1960s and many of them listed in the US-Top-100-Billboard-Charts, any contemporary American reader will most likely have listened to the exact same tunes during the Vietnam years.¹⁹ A constant update of the latest US

¹⁶ Appointed U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam from 1967–1973 by Lyndon B. Johnson.

¹⁷ US rock band around guitarist and composer Frank Zappa.

¹⁸ United States Army General during the Tet Offensive (1964–68).

¹⁹ Such as Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out Of This Place” (D 257) and Jr. Walker & The All Stars’ “Shotgun” (D 258) in 1965, Sam The Sham & The Pharaohs’ “Li’l Red Riding Hood” (D 22) and Paul Revere and The Raiders’ “Hungry” (D 257) in 1966, Scott McKenzie’s “San Francisco (Be

hits was guaranteed in Vietnam, as Herr explains: “Whenever one of us came back from an R&R²⁰ we’d bring records” (D 234). Apart from that, the radio made many popular songs available²¹ as the introduction to the lines of Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth” emphasizes: “It was a song that had been on the radio a lot this winter” (D 138). Without a doubt, an American civilian back in the US would confirm this statement, Springfield’s single being listed #7 of the Billboard Charts in 1967 (cf. *billboard* n. pag.). In short, references to these works serve as shared cultural knowledge which further enhances the (American) reader’s identification with the soldiers.

At the same time, however, by allowing an insight into the soldiers’ perspective, Herr also uses references to rock music to show the different kind of sense-making that is at work in war; or, as Cletus Keating nicely phrases it, “as a heuristic device to help his readers grasp the difference between the mind of the civilian and the mind of the soldier” (112). In various passages, it becomes evident how strongly dependent the meaning of a song is on the situation in which it is listened to. When a soldier in Vietnam hears the Rolling Stones singing “Please come see me at the Citadel,” for example, he is inevitably reminded of the Citadel of Hue (see for example D 74, 80, 242) – “that word putting a chill in the room” just as much as the band name “the Grateful Dead” (D 234). In the same way, the lyrics of The Beatles’ “Magical Mystery Tour” take on a new complexion when played in Vietnam: “The Magical Mystery Tour is waiting to take you away ... dy-ing [sic] to take you away”; words which Herr suddenly perceives as “incredibly sinister” (D 108). Without hesitation, the soldiers and Herr conclude: “That was a song about Khe Sanh!” (ibid.). The effect this description of the “inverted meaning of the Beatles song” has on a civilian reader familiar with the title (which almost every reader would be at the time) is aptly elaborated on by Keating:

These readers would be struck by the substantial change in meaning the war setting forces on the lyrics. Outside the war zone, the song could be taken as a nonsensical fantasy journey ... At Khe Sanh, however, ... the word ‘tour’ refers to the place where one is stationed, ‘take you away’ is an informal expression for being killed, and ‘dy-ing’ is not understood figuratively. (111)

The same effect, only in a reverse manner, is achieved in a passage citing lines from “Trouble Comin’ Every Day” by the Mothers of Invention. Though (in contrast to “The Magical Mystery Tour”) meant as a song about war and understood

Sure And Wear Some Flowers In Your Hair)” (D 123) in 1967 and Archie Bell & the Drells’ “The Tighten Up” (D 8) in 1968 (cf. *billboard.com* n. pag.).

²⁰ Acronym for Rest and Recuperation.

²¹ In her essay on “Folksongs in the Vietnam War,” Lydia M. Fish provides some interesting details on how US songs became available in Vietnam via radio, local bands, musically inclined soldiers, records etc. (esp. 392ff).

as such in the US, Herr, speaking for himself and his fellow correspondents, distances their situation from the one described in the song: “That wasn’t really about *us*, no” (D 218, original emphasis).

Last but not least, rock music is thematized in *Dispatches* to establish a direct parallel to Vietnam as such; almost a synonym for the war. Rock offers a “polysemy, by virtue of which it was used as an ironic metaphor ... for the war as a whole” (James 80). Correspondingly, Herr describes looking at the faces of the soldiers as “looking into the faces at a rock concert” (D 16) and aligns the painted face of a Lurp with “that of the Haight-Ashbury acid-heads” (Campbell 199) – two “extreme[s] of the same theater” (D 6). As Philip Beidler finds, in *Dispatches* “Vietnam is a song title (‘Stop the War, These Cats Is Killing Themselves’ [D 10]), a piece of radio traffic (‘Willy Peter/ Make you a buh lieber’ [ibid.])” (271). Two pages towards the end, as if it took him all these years back in the US²² to fully understand the connection, Herr brings this parallelism to the point:

Out on the street, I couldn’t tell the Vietnam veterans from the rock and roll veterans. The Sixties had made so many casualties, its war and its music had run power off the same circuit for so long, they didn’t even have to fuse. The war primed you for lame years while rock and roll turned more lurid and dangerous than bullfighting, rock stars started falling like second lieutenants ... What I thought of as two obsessions were really only one. (D 258)

Thematizing Photography

While rock music, as has just been shown, is mostly (and exhaustively) thematized by references to specific works, there are only few of such concrete individual references to photography to be found throughout *Dispatches*. One of them is “a *Paris-Match* photograph show[ing] Flynn and a French photographer carrying him on a door, his face half covered with bandages” (D 237), another “[a]n epiphany of Hue [which] appeared in John Olson’s great photograph for *Life*, the wounded from Delta Company hurriedly piled on a tank” (D 81), and a third the February 1968 issue of *TIME* with “General Giap on the cover” (D 212). The latter two being published in two of the best-selling US magazines of the 1960s, they were certainly familiar to most readers; especially when the chapter which contains the *Life*-reference, “Hell. Sucks,” was first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1969, the same year as the picture. Thus, mentioning it serves as a link between what is (just) being read to what has (previously) been looked at; a connection of the events and characters described in *Dispatches* to the images readers know from the media.

Notably, this correlation works reciprocally: on the one hand, it lends authenticity to the story by stressing its non-fictionality; on the other hand, it humanizes

²² The first and the last chapter (tellingly titled “Breathing In” and “Breathing Out”) were only written seven years after Herr’s return from Vietnam (cf. Herr, “We” 41).

the referred to pictures by reminding their beholders that there are actual persons in front of and behind the camera. This appears particularly important in the light of the abundance of images of war. “Bilder [vom Krieg] lagen in den Wohnzimmern der Amerikaner ‘wie ein Blutfleck auf dem Teppich’ ... wenn [der Amerikaner] beim Frühstück mit Cornflakes und Toast die Morgenzeitung aufschlug, sah ihn der Krieg an” (Adam & Fabian 31). Though or precisely because of the integration of such pictures into the daily life of American citizens, their content was easily overshadowed by their iconology: “[H]arrowing photographs ... may endure in memory, but the circumstances of those images and the story they once told become detached through their repetition and familiarity” (Hoskins 11); *Dispatches* puts them back into context.

More than only serving as a bilateral “Wirklichkeitsreferenz” (Wolf, “Intermedialität” 183), a reference to such pictures also functions as another connecting link to political protest. Photography was discovered “as a powerful tool that swayed public opinion in the United States” (Schwenkel 55). Shocking images – in part precisely due to their iconic quality – “fueled the antiwar movement, and arguably reversed public sentiment on the war” (ibid.); “photography as shock therapy,” as Susan Sontag succinctly phrases it (14). Though only three of such photographs are explicitly referred to in *Dispatches*, they are implicitly called up whenever a picture magazine in general – such as *Life* or *TIME* – or a well-known photographer – such as AP photographer Rick Merron, UPI photographer Tim Page, CBS/AP photographer Dana Stone, or freelance *TIME* photojournalist Sean Flynn – is being mentioned. All of these participated in what Nixon called (of course fiercely criticizing and misusing it for his own ends) “[the] relentless and literal reporting of the war, the result [of which] was a serious demoralization of the home front” (qtd. in Hallin 3). While this view on the part of the media in the Vietnam War can be (and has been) contested, it can still be said that “a new generation of war correspondents” was born in Vietnam, which “proved to be more skeptical and cynical than its predecessors” (Donovan & Scherer 84).

Accordingly, the persons behind the cameras are presented as being deeply intertwined with the particular historical moment of Vietnam. Among “Those Crazy Guys Who Cover the War,” as Herr (including himself) keeps calling the press corps (*D* 188), photographer Tim Page most clearly illustrates this point. Several pages of *Dispatches* are entirely dedicated to giving the reader a grasp of his personality. Depicted as “the Sixties Kid” *par excellence* (*D* 236), he takes the 60s drugs (cf. *D* 238), listens to the 60s music (cf. *D* 239), and his “speech is [as] littered with the 60s Americanism ‘man’” (Hamilton 50) as his field gear is “augmented with freak paraphernalia, scarves and beads” (*D* 7).²³ Although he is the “most extravagant” example of the “young, apolitically radical, wigged out crazies,” he can be understood as a representative for this whole “authentic subculture” that has evolved in

²³ Probably due to these characteristics, it was Tim Page who inspired the character of the photojournalist in *Apocalypse Now*, who looks like a hippie more than a prototype war correspondent.

Vietnam (*D* 235f). References to Page thus serve to identify photography as “a medium whose practitioners are ‘hip’”; hipness here signifying “a young, apolitical recklessness,” which allows to see “the Vietnam War as a sixties youth ‘trip’” (Hamilton 51).

Connoting tourism as much as drug use, the idea of a ‘trip’ positions the photographer not as “the producer of images with a political currency” but rather as “an objective tourist ... recording not only the horror, but also the beauty, as if on a Third World package tour” (ibid. 54). In this way, the photojournalists are turned into a tool of demonstrating how the war was constructed as a giant spectacle one could “turn on and trip out on” (*D* 235). One of the main motifs of *Dispatches*’ penultimate chapter, “Colleagues,” is to outline this view as a common feature not only of the photographers but also of the soldiers. Just like “those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists” (Sontag 18), the ‘grunts,’ too, inhabit Vietnam as “adventurers” (*D* 51, 223); seeking “Asia, war, drugs, the whole adventure” (*D* 236). The likening of the photographers – as observers – with the soldiers – as killers – works towards blurring the distinction between watching and doing:

A journalist’s decision to photograph a moment of death or to capture terror and anguish on film raises complex ethical issues, as there is a paradoxical participation – taking the picture – through a lack of participation – not offering help but recording the act. (Schwenkel 56)

Exactly such a situation is described in *Dispatches*, when “a dying,” not a dead, Southern Vietnamese soldier is brought to the camp: “We all gathered around to look at him, ... [a]ll of the photographers leaned in for pictures” – but not for help (*D* 235, see also *D* 202). It is hence ultimately through the thematization of photography that Herr expresses what the war taught him: “that you were as responsible for everything you saw as for everything you did” (*D* 20).

What demarcates the photographer from the soldier, however, is the all-important fact that the latter was drafted, forced to be in Vietnam; while the former came on his own free will. “You mean you don’ *have* to be here? An’ you’re *here*?” (*D* 119, original emphasis), as one grunt expresses his disbelief (see also *D* 115, 187, 206). This role of the photojournalist as the “true volunteer” (*D* 20), constitutes their probably most central function for *Dispatches*: to express the deep fascination with war that accompanies its gruesomeness. In the longest and most expressive passage on photography, this “infatuation with violence” (*D* 63) is explained by an insatiable voyeurism:

You know how it is, you want to look and you don’t want to look. I can remember the strange feelings I had when I was a kid looking at war photographs in *Life*, the ones that showed dead people or a lot of dead people lying close together in a field or a street, often touch-

ing, seeming to hold each other. ... I didn't have a language for it then, but I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world. (D 18)

Apart from again using photographs, and also their appearance in the magazine *Life*, to connect Vietnam to previous atrocities, these lines suggest a sexual dimension to the war (see also D 63, 132, 136, 160), especially to war photography. "All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic," Susan Sontag agrees; "[i]mages of the repulsive allure" (95). Calling this reaction "'morbid' suggests a rare aberration," she goes on, which it is not: "Everyone knows what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash" (ibid.). The above cited direct address – *You* know how it is – stresses this universality. In an interview for the documentary *First Kill*, Herr makes it even more explicit: "It would not be useful to pretend to anyone that [war] doesn't really turn people on ... it always has done and always will" (n. pag.). Accordingly, Herr calls the ambiguity towards war a "rough reconciliation that many of us had to look at" – not only the photographer – "trying to piece together the very real hatred of the war with the great love for it" (D 221).

In the end of the above begun text passage, to come to the last aspect, Herr uses his experience of looking at war photographs to comment on the relation of these to the reality of war:

Even when the picture was sharp and cleanly defined, something wasn't clear at all, something repressed that monitored the images and withheld their essential information ... I could have looked until my lamps went out and still I wouldn't have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of a body. (D 18)

Here, pictures are described as being insufficient to convey all the information to its onlooker. This reference thus points to the impossibility of mediating the essence of war, even by means of a medium which allegedly captures reality. He goes on to explain how seeing the depicted objects in real life – instead of looking at them on photographs – is expected to change your understanding of war: "Supposedly, you weren't going to have that kind of obscuration when you finally started seeing them on real ground in front of you" (D 19). Now having faced such reality, he learnt that it does not make things any clearer at all: "You tended to manufacture it anyway because of how often and how badly you needed protection from what you were seeing, had actually come 30,000 miles to see" (ibid.). Obviously, Herr's experience of Vietnam has proved that the 'repressed information' of the photographs, does not make it through in reality either. Facing the 'real' war has not made it any more comprehensible to him: "Only see[ing] what you can bear to see" (Herr, *First Kill* n. pag.), the obscuration remains.

Thematizing Film

With regard to the thematization of film in *Dispatches*, the reflection of the relation between reality and representations thereof can be identified as the most prominent function, which operates on at least three different levels. One dimension of this interplay are the expectations that movies have raised about going to war. “We all had our movie-fed war fantasies” (D 194), Herr writes, making clear that everyone in Vietnam – soldiers as well as correspondents – came there with a particular, media-induced, idea of what war would be like. The 1945 World War II movie *A Walk in the Sun* (D 46), the 1959 post-apocalyptic ‘World War III’ movie *On the Beach* (D 70), the 1958 film adaptation *The Quiet American* (D 210), and the 1966 Western *Nevada Smith* (D 60) are some of the explicitly referred to films which have shaped this vision of war. On top of these, a longer passage deals with *Fort Apache* (1948), starring John Wayne, which, according to Herr, is “more a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm” (D 46).

Taking the US actor as a major source of false ideas about war, Herr self-explanatorily calls the ‘gleeful’ anticipation for going to Vietnam a “John Wayne wetdream” (D 20), again stressing the eroticism involved. Correspondingly, Tobey C. Herzog labels the “shaping [of] the romantic illusions about Vietnam embraced by the young American combat soldiers” as the “John-Wayne-Syndrome” (19). Turning to another Wayne movie, Herr explains that *The Green Berets* (1968) – theoretically “the first film to address the [Vietnam] war explicitly” (Gustainis 138) – “doesn’t count” as a war movie since it practically “wasn’t really about Vietnam, [but] about Santa Monica” (D 188). While this comment specifically laments the ‘Hollywoodness’ of *The Green Berets*, it also points to the general unsuitability of Vietnam as a *sujet* for mainstream cinema:

In any other war, they would have made movies about us ... but Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don’t even want to hear about it, you know they’re not going to pay money to sit in the dark and have it brought up. (ibid.)

Hence, in the late 1960s, John Wayne’s California/Western-version of the Vietnam War obviously constitutes the only way to make it suitable for the (American) masses (see also Dittmar 150). In a contemporary, remarkably anticipatory, 1968 *New York Times* review, Renata Adler positions *The Green Berets* within this larger context: “[It] is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it ... becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam ... but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this country” (n. pag.). Understanding filmic war representations, in general, as misrepresentations, it follows that the false expectations they fuel are eventually belied: the “*Dawn Patrol* fantasy would turn very ugly” (D 230) for all those “kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good” (D 209). Neil Postman’s famous words, that “we are a people on the verge

of amusing ourselves to death” (4), take on a lethally literal meaning here; “[that’s] what happens to you when you pursue a fantasy until it becomes experience” (D 68).

Another dimension of the reality-movie-relation outlined by the thematization of film in *Dispatches* is the perception of war as a movie, even when already in the field. Relating his first combat experience, Herr admits:

We’d all seen too many movies, ... , years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. The first few times that I got fired at or saw combat deaths, nothing really happened, all the responses got locked in my head. It was the same familiar violence, only moved over to another medium; some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end. (D 209)

This passage vividly demonstrates how the movies serve as a framework through which the war is experienced; a framework which, as a sort of protective mechanism, seemingly brings about a relieving distance to the atrocities witnessed. What is most striking about it is that it presents reality as yet another *medium*, instead of the ‘antagonist’ to or the ‘original’ of the many circulating media representations. Again, calling up the passage on war photography, seeing war with one’s proper eyes does apparently not bring about clarity or illumination but is, by contrast, obscured by pre-conceived Hollywood images of war. Early in *Dispatches*, Herr renders a dialog with a sergeant which stresses this point: “‘This ain’t the fucking movies over here, you know,’ he said. I laughed again and said that I knew, but he knew that I didn’t.” (D 22). Similarly, a shrapnel-hit Marine later swears: “I *hate* this movie” (D 188, original emphasis). About his own experience Herr writes: “It took me a month to lose this feeling of being a spectator to something that was part game, part show” (D 168). To realize that one is not only watching a film is an awareness that takes time, that some only come upon in retrospect, and some escape forever; “most combat troops stopped thinking of the war as an adventure after their first few firefights but there were always the ones who couldn’t let that go” (D 209). These latter ones remain trapped in the understanding of war as a spectacle, denying the abiding truth: “Vietnam, not a movie, no jive cartoon either where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights, ... then up again and whole and back in the game, ‘Nobody Dies,’ as someone said in another war movie” (D 46).

The third dimension of the reciprocity of war movies and war itself is probably the most unexpected: war imitates the movies. In a significant passage, Herr describes how the soldiers enact combat as they know it from Hollywood scenes:

You don’t know what a media freak is until you’ve seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that

there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire (D 209)

Driven by “the American male’s image of toughness, courage, patriotic duty, honor, and glory” (Herzog 23), these soldiers mimic stereotypical war heroes familiar with from the movies, “acting out their fantasies” (D 50), playing Cowboys and Indians. Reading the passage against Baudrillard, Brady Harrison rightly finds that this “John-Wayne-Grunt, modeled after a simulation (‘the Duke’) of a simulation (‘John Wayne’) of an obscure reality (Marion Morrison), is a perfect simulacrum” (97). Indeed, in Vietnam the real becomes the ‘hyperreal’ to stay in postmodern discourse, a “fucking circus” (D 220) to use Herr’s words; a world where “John Wayne-ing” (James 83, Paul 317) is a verb and “just-like-in-the-movies” (D 217) an adjective – “Life-as-movie, war-as-(war)movie, war-as-life” (D 65).

4.2 Imitation of Mass Media: The Intermediality of *Dispatches*

What has been shown so far is how intermediality appears in *Dispatches* by means of explicit thematizations of music, photography and film. While these already perform a variety of different functions and have profound implications for the overall text, they only make up one half of what has initially been outlined as intermedial references. *Intermedial imitation* (Wolf) – or *simulation* (Rajewsky) – constitutes for the other, more implicit half which must not be ignored here. It hardly comes as a surprise that the ways in which *Dispatches* resembles other media are much more difficult to grasp than the ways in which it thematizes them. While the latter can be pinpointed to particular passages, even words, the former is rather an overall effect and is hence harder to sense and to localize. Also, as Wolf remarks, “intermedial imitation as an implicit reference needs some elements which render the intermediality explicit” instead of making the “defamiliarization of the medium” appear as just “a general experimental aesthetics” (“Revisited” 29). Obviously, explicit thematizations can serve as such markers of implicit imitation (cf. Rajewsky, “Light” 48). As the previous pages have demonstrated, these abound in *Dispatches* to such a degree that any form of implicit intermediality may be understood as such. For the remaining part of the present close-reading, the emphasis shall therefore be shifted from the level of content to that of form in order to come to an understanding of how *Dispatches* imitates other (mass) media: How does it employ “its own media-specific means” to simulate “a different medial system” (Rajewsky, “Remediation” 55)? To answer this question, the three previously discussed mass media will be retained as central points of reference: how does *Dispatches* create music-ness, photography-ness and film-ness?

Imitating (Rock) Music

Even as a printed book, *Dispatches* is not entirely silent. By means of intermedial imitation it “solicits in the recipient,” to use Rajewsky’s words, “a sense of ... acoustic presence” (“Remediation” 55). *Dispatches* creates an aural dimension through imitating melodies, sounds and (spoken) language. The first of these is most effectively simulated by partially reproducing works of music in the form of citing their lyrics. In extension of the copyright page, acknowledgement is made to 17 different songs, of which single words or whole lines are being reprinted in the text (cf. *D* vii-viii). As has been outlined in part 4.1, all of these were popular 1960s songs, the reproduction of which thus automatically lends an acoustic quality to the text: “until I heard it in my sleep ... *I fell into a burning ring of fire*, surrounded by strungout rednecks, ... they were afraid they wouldn’t know it when they finally got it, *and it burns burns burns*” (*D* 13) – no one familiar with the Johnny Cash tune can read these lines without hearing the melody, without hearing it sung²⁴ (see also *D* 108, 138, 181, 234). The perpetual presence of music on the content level further amplifies this effect; “the spirit of Morrison and Hendrix and Zappa so permeate every page that you can almost hear their music blaring in the background” (Kenney n. pag.). Likewise, one virtually hears the disc jockey roaring from the radio: “moving right along here with our fabulous Sounds of the Sixties” (*D* 137).

Also other voices gain a particularly oral quality through Herr’s marked attentiveness to dialects. The words of a German “who had lost all traces of his original accent” and replaced it with “a gruff, clipped Brooklyn-docks way of speaking” seem likewise true for Herr: “I got dis tuhriffic eah fuh langwidjis” (*D* 145f). This is by far not the only sentence which reads like a phonetic transcription more than like a line in a book. By means of such fine-grained quotations of oral speech, “*Dispatches* constantly struggles to metamorphose itself into spoken language in order to distance itself from the degraded [written] language of power” (Thompson 584). Lastly, sound is created in *Dispatches* by the frequent use of onomatopoeia, which makes us hear “that wrenching, resonant metal echo” of gunfire or the “noise of the rotor blades” (*D* 167) which are so characteristic of Herr’s perception of Vietnam: “tat-tat-tat, tatta-tatta-tat” (*D* 187), “bbbdddrpp” (*D* 35), “whump whump whump and dit dit dit” (*D* 63). What Herr says about being in a chopper thus also describes the auditory impact of *Dispatches*: “cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other” (*D* 9).

On top of simulating the audibility of (rock) music, *Dispatches* also imitates its register. Not only the persons depicted make use of expressions that obviously derive from rock music, but also the text proper. Herr tells his story “in the lingo of rock music” (Herring 153). *Rock ‘n’ roll* itself is being used as an expression for “fire from an M-16 on full automatic” (ibid.), which explains that Herr does not talk about constant entertainment when he remarks that there was “Rock around

²⁴ Surprisingly, instead of making use of the medium’s audibility by singing or even playing the lines, the audio book version mitigates this effect by completely leaving out most reproductions of song lyrics; replacing them with just the song title or omitting the whole passage.

the clock" (D 14). Slang expressions such as "motherfucker," "jag," "suck," "stoned," "hyper," "groovy," or "dig," as well as colloquial addresses such as "Dude," "Kid," "Jive" or "Man" can be considered traces of the American 60s subculture. Moving from direct speech to free indirect discourse to indirect speech to narrative voice, they provide a fluent passage from content to form. A chapter heading like "Hell Sucks" (D 70) clearly underlines this point and contributes to the 'rock musicness' of *Dispatches*, which itself becomes an example of "the speaking styles of young American soldiers: fast paced, full of slang, very much shaped by popular culture" (Paredes n. pag.).

Imitating Photography

Dispatches creates a photographic visuality in at least three different ways which vary in their intensity, or degree of intermediality. The first, and probably the most literary one, is the use of figurative language: "I felt a cold fat drop of sweat start down the middle of my back like a spider" (D 23); "the moon came up nasty and full, a fat moist piece of decadent fruit" (D 11). Such similes, metaphors, or other figures of speech do either serve to familiarize the unfamiliar (as in "choppers fell out of the sky like fat poisoned birds" (D 14)); or, *vice versa*, to defamiliarize the familiar, as in the above given examples, which present something common (the moon or sweat) in a strangely new light (as a fruit or a spider). In many cases, Herr draws on imagery generated from the context of war. In the beginning of *Dispatches*, he describes his fear as "the Elephant²⁵ ... kneeling on [his] chest" (D 5), which finds its counterpart expressed in the end as "one last chopper ... [which] flew out of [his] chest" (D 260). Here, the choice of the vehicle leads to a specific form of defamiliarization in that it implies that the allegedly familiar tenor is precisely not to be compared to the feeling of fear or relief one knows from civilian life. Regardless of such nuances, all these figures are "textual entities with a strong visual character" (Mamirovic 5).

A similar but still distinct means of suggesting a visual dimension is *ekphrasis*, "the verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan 39). In *Dispatches*, many examples of ekphrastic writing can be found, such as the description of a collage (D 176f) or the constant referral to pieces of "helmet graffiti" (D 226, 158) which run through the text like a golden thread – "TIME IS ON MY SIDE" (D 21), "HIGH ON WAR" (D 63), "PRAY FOR WAR" (D 27) etc. Obviously, the typesetting further enhances the visual quality of the latter such as when Herr "passed a blind man carrying a sign that read MY DAYS ARE DARKER THAN YOUR NIGHTS" (D 244f) or speaks of "enormous red letters across the front of [another] helmet: MAYHEW" (D 115). The most striking and most exhaustively discussed example of *ekphrasis*, however, is the map which opens the book: "There was a map of Vietnam. . . it was very old ... [t]he paper had buckled in its frame

²⁵ As the capitalization indicates, the vehicle here is *the* Elephant, a bomber aircraft, rather than *an* elephant, the animal. Interestingly, though, even if readers miss this military meaning, the image produced remains almost the same: something big weighing heavy on your chest.

after years in the wet Saigon heat” (*D* 3). In contrast to the above discussed figures of speech – which “boast semiotic unity” and are “essentially all language” – an ekphrastic passage like this one “is language replacing and ‘crossing’ a sign system outside language” (Yacobi 94). As such, it “entails semiotic bi-polarity,” which has an even stronger visual impact and makes it even ‘more’ intermedial (*ibid.*). In the case of the map, the visual representation is not only vividly described but is also taken from a framework familiar to the reader; everyone has a concept of what maps look like and can thus picture the one described more easily.

This effect is enhanced, if a specific visual representation is being referred to that is part of the reader’s world; which brings us to the third means to evoke visually: (non-fictional) intermedial individual references. The ones to contemporary and widely received photographs outlined in part 4.1, for example, are perfect demonstrations of this point. A full vivid description is not even necessary in such a case but a reference is enough to call to mind the cover of *TIME* magazine, the photograph in *Life* or other pictures of the war in any reader who is familiar with them. Reading the enumeration of “obligatory” Vietnam shots – including “the Zippo-lighter shot,” and the “severed-head shot” (*D* 198f) – is like virtually flipping through the pages of a photo album. Any of such verbal references hence evokes a visual quality and thus “create[s] a specific image that is to be found in the text as its ‘resident alien’” (Mitchell, *Picture* 157).

To take this thought one step further: In the case of a highly medialized event, as the Vietnam War was and is, not even a reference seems to be necessary to create such word pictures. Since the reader’s perception of the verbal artifact is inextricably linked to previously conceived visual ones, the mentioning of certain keywords will suffice to elicit an image. If, for example, in a text on 9/11 the words *tower* or *dust* or *fireman* appear, we cannot help but visualize particular, endlessly repeated, (media) images. In the context of Vietnam, most of all for the 1960s/1970s readership of *Dispatches*, the same holds true for expressions such as *chopper*, *rice paddy*, *body bags*, or *napalm bomb* – they inevitably recall visual icons of the war. A passage like the following makes it almost impossible not to form one of the many infamous black and white shots in one’s mind’s eye:

Sometimes the chopper you were riding in would top a hill and all the ground in front of you ... would be charred and pitted and still smoking ... frail gray smoke where they’d burned off the rice fields ... brilliant white smoke from phosphorous ... deep black smoke from ‘palm. (*D* 10)

Reading these words, we subconsciously turn Herr’s verbal description of his ‘reality’ of war into a visual representation thereof; into one of the many black-and-white photographs we have seen from Vietnam. As if exchanging the panchromatic for the color film and changing the framing from a long shot to a close-up, Herr writes some pages later:

I knew I hadn't seen anything until I saw this face. It was flushed and mottled and twisted like he had his face skin on inside out, a patch of green that was too dark, a streak of red running into bruise purple, a lot of sick gray white in between. (D 19)²⁶

Interspersed with such verbal photographs, *Dispatches* "become[s] a piece of photo-journalism without the pictures, [a] narrative version of *Life* magazine" (Herzog 79).

The book's overall structure further underlines this impression. *Dispatches* presents itself to us as what Vietnam presents itself to Herr: "as a series of discrete images that demand individual completion ... and reveal their possible relationships only through a process of personal absorption, connection, and invention" (Myers 150). We are confronted with "a kaleidoscopic series of snapshots" (Doherty 24), similar to the one described in *Dispatches*: "snaps of their families, their wives, their dogs, their cows, their cars, of Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, ... the Pope, Che Guevara ... Jimi Hendrix" (D 57). The same paratactical structure informs *Dispatches* as a whole, which presents its many 'dispatches' as equally meaningful (or meaningless) and interchangeable. Seen in this light, Herr's vivid description of a collage turns into a most self-reflexive moment: *Dispatches* itself appears to be a psychedelic topsy-turvy of "wounded Marines," "newspaper headlines," "chopper[s]," "cannabis," "Mick Jagger," "American flags," and "stacked Vietcong dead" (D 176).

Imitating Film

The combination of (musical) audibility and (photographic) visibility turns *Dispatches* into an audio-visual experience, a movie as it were. This is most clearly illustrated through a passage which reproduces parts of "Trouble Comin' Every Day" by The Mothers of Invention. Like stage directions, the lyrics are interspersed with the reactions of the soldiers to the respective line: "You know I watch that rotten box until my head begin to hurt, (bitter funny looks passing around the room), 'And if another woman driver gets machine-gunned from her seat, ... (lip-biting, flinching, nervous laughter)" (D 218). Herr here imitates a film scene in which sounds and images overlap which is just one of the many passages in which "he asks us to see *Dispatches* as a film instead of a book" (Harrison 89). The chapter "Hell Sucks," to name but one other example, opens with the sentence: "By 2:30 every day Saigon looked like the final reel of *On the Beach*" (D 70)²⁷. Hinting at

²⁶ Hauntingly demonstrating how history repeats itself, today's readers may feel strongly reminded of the infamous face of the "Marlboro Man from Fajallah" (2004), a U.S. Marine in *Iraq*, which indeed perfectly fits Herr's verbal close-up.

²⁷ The use of film vocabulary arguably adds up to *Dispatches*' filmness: the war "was some scene (you found out), there was no cutting it" (D 210), to give just one glaring example. The term *scene* is used more than twenty times in *Dispatches* (e.g. D 59, 231, 240, 251) and although being a word which also exists outside the realm of movies, the latter's constant presence on the content level makes readers automatically associate it with a film context. The same holds true for expressions

Herr's "own education through war movies" as much as relying on our cinematic literacy, "*Dispatches* asks that the reader, a seasoned viewer of cinema and television screens, constructs a motion picture screen to capture Herr's projection of Vietnam" (ibid. 69); we have to watch it and listen to it, rather than to read it. *Dispatches* can therefore eventually be seen as "a surrealistic prose film" of which "Herr becomes writer, director, and principal actor" (Herzog 82). The incessant references to film further provoke such a comparison, all the more when Herr himself calls the text his "movie" (D 206, 219): "we have all been compelled to make our own movies ... and this one is mine" (D 188).

Already the title of *Dispatches* is suggestive of the book's fragmented, filmic overall structure. As James C. Wilson points out, "*Dispatches* is a book of dispatches or fragments, bits of narrative that remain diffuse and discontinuous" (45). Kurt Dittmar, in explaining his criticism of the German title translation "An die Hölle verraten" (Rowohlt, 1989), uses the same argument: "Denn der Leser wird mit einem verwirrenden Konglomerat von 'Depeschen' ... und nicht mit vordergründigen Moralismen konfrontiert" (155). Indeed, *Dispatches* connotes *dis*-junction, *dis*-continuity and *patch*-work, which mirrors the war itself: "If you were one of those people who always thought they had to know what was coming next, the war could cream you" (D 13). Analogously, Herr's work does not follow a chronological, continuous order either. Time keeps moving back and forth; past, present, and future flowing into one another by means of memories, nightmares, *analepses* and *prolepses*. While one may well describe this technique in postmodern terms, it can even better be expressed in cinematic ones: The various 'dispatches' are "edited together in a rapid-paced and sharp witted montage" (Sturken 87); they are separated by "frequent jump cuts served up by the ever-present helicopter or drug-induced reveries rather than the camera" (Herzog 82).

5 Conclusion: We've All Been There

Dispatches is a text so intricate and multi-faceted that one always has the feeling of not doing justice to its profound complexity. In combination with the broad concept of intermediality it becomes an endlessly fruitful source for literary analysis. Therefore, the previous pages are but a carefully chosen selection of significant passages which have to stand representative for a much larger whole. Nevertheless, the preceding media sensitive close reading of Herr's work has brought forth a number of valuable findings. Most broadly summarized, it has been shown, on the one hand, that via exhaustive intermedial thematization of (rock) music, photography, and film, mass media become ubiquitous in *Dispatches* and open up additional layers of sense making (4.1). On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that – true to the dictum 'form mirrors content' – the book's own language, structure and

such as "fade out" (D 11), "flicker" (D 23), "action" (D 42, 51, 62), "stunt" (D 13), or the phrase "no preferred cut" (D 15).

audio/-visual effect are likewise informed by mass media through means of inter-medial imitation (4.2). On both levels, it has been made clear that intermediality in and of *Dispatches* has not only a textual but even more so a cultural dimension. As “discursive markers of larger cultural issues” (Stein 182), its intermedial references and allusions are deeply rooted in its socio-historical background, 1960s USA. However, their overall effect in Herr’s work is in fact ahead of its own time. Only now that torture videos by US soldiers in Iraq can be watched on *YouTube* and a nation calls for an ‘evidence’ photo to be persuaded of Osama Bin Laden’s death, the poignancy of *Dispatches*’ concerns becomes fully evident. Illustrating the reciprocity between the media and the Vietnam War, it draws attention to the many ways in which media in general shape not only our perception of reality but even reality as such. Together, this leads to a fundamental ‘mass-media-ness’ of all postmodern experience – “we are all increasingly living in ... [a] media wonderland” (Herr, “We” 38).

In this postmodern wonderland, the idea of media rivalry becomes as obsolete as the distinction between reality and representations thereof; everything as closely intertwined that one can no longer be distinguished from the other. Accordingly, Herr neither presents Vietnam as a television war nor as the photographer’s or the writer’s war; but simply as “the first terrible postmodern war” (Jameson 44) in which all rigid categories have lost their currency. Without repeating every distinct function that each of the focused on media perform, it can be said in summary that intermediality, or inter-mass-media-lity to be precise, functions as a deconstructive means within *Dispatches*: it blurs the lines between high and low art, between seeing and acting, between past and present, between disgust and alluringness, and most importantly between reality and media representations. Ultimately, it thus also challenges the clear-cut distinction between soldiers and civilians; between Vietnam and the US. In so doing, to return to the opening imagery, *Dispatches* tears down the walls between in- and outside Plato’s cave.

On top of including elements of shared cultural knowledge and dissolving the line between the ‘real’ and the ‘mediated’ war, the incapability of perceiving the reality of Vietnam runs through *Dispatches* as a central *leitmotif*. Herr himself has ‘left the cave’ in going to Vietnam, but experienced what Plato foresees: “When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities” (43). Waiting in vain for his eyes to adjust to the glaring ‘light’ of war, Herr finds that “night was the war’s truest medium” (D 41); the only medium, it seems, he ever endowed with any form of Truth among all those which are insufficient to tell the story of Vietnam. A story in which reality is as much a construct as any representation thereof because it is “a monstrous text, collectively authored” (Thompson 583) by the people and the media alike of a whole generation. “For Herr, the Vietnam War is a symptom of the Sixties ... an essential generational experience, like trying drugs and listening to the White Album ... and it doesn’t really matter whether you actually, physically participated (inhaled?) or not” (Campbell 199). In other words, it is not so much “a

matter of ‘being there’ ... as a matter of being an American in the last half of the twentieth century trying to make sense of a collocation of experience and myth called Vietnam” (Beidler 266). To end on the resonating last words of *Dispatches*: “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (*D* 260).

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