

# “I speak with the Voice of Things to Come”: Reading “The Vietnam Project” Today

**John Masterson**

## Summary

In this article I argue that a rereading of “The Vietnam Project” allows us to explore the varied functions of what has been dubbed “war-porn” in relation to global image consumption then (with respect to Vietnam) and now (with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan). From renewed interest in depictions of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to acknowledging swipes at the Bush and Blair administrations in *Diary of a Bad Year*, recent Coetzee scholarship has been enlivened by debates clustered around the most recent wounding of the American body politic: 9/11. By analysing an earlier piece, which is preoccupied with a conflict for which the wound emerged as the defining trope, I consider the prophetic power of “The Vietnam Project”. I argue that it makes for compelling reading owing to issues such as wounding, trauma, war, its mediatisation, and the associated discourses that continue to haunt the American popular and political imagination.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat mens by die herlees van “The Vietnam Project” verskeie funksies van wat “oorlogspornografie” genoem word, kan verken met betrekking tot die wêreldwye beeldverbruik van toe (met die Viëtnamese oorlog) en van nou (met die oorlog in Irak en Afghanistan). Ná hernieude belangstelling in die uitbeelding van marteling in *Waiting for the Barbarians* en die erkenning van kritiek op Bush en Blair in *Diary of a Bad Year*, was daar opnuut ’n opflukking in die vakkundigheid oor J.M. Coetzee vanweë die debat oor die verwonding van die Amerikaanse politieke bestel: 9/11. Die profetiese krag van “The Vietnam Project” word in oënskou geneem aan die hand van ’n ontleding van een van Coetzee se vroeëre werke oor konflik waarin die wond as die definiërende troep te voorskyn tree. Ek voer verder aan dat “The Vietnam Project” ’n boeiende roman is oor verwonding, trauma, oorlog, die mediatisering daarvan en verwante diskoerse wat in die Amerikaanse populêre en politieke psige bly spook.

When I looked at those photographs, something broke ... I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded ... something went dead; something is still crying .... An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs – think of the Vietnam War .... But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.

The same law holds for evil as for pornography. The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more.

(Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 20)

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 ... often touching, 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.

(Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 23)

Both *On Photography* and *Dispatches* were originally published in 1977. Three years earlier, J.M. Coetzee released *Dusklands*, his first major work of fiction. In what follows, I offer an analysis of its first half, “The Vietnam Project”, arguing that Coetzee’s novella anticipates many of Sontag’s and Herr’s key preoccupations. Whilst 2012 marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of *On Photography* and *Dispatches* respectively, both continue to make for haunting reading today in a globalised context defined as much by conflict as it is by the various ways in which that conflict is mediated. Much ink has been spilled over the parallels, or otherwise, between American occupations of and/or military misadventures in Vietnam then and Iraq, Afghanistan et al. now (see, for example, Gardner & Young (2007)). If for both Sontag and Herr, provocative, because discomfiting, connections exist between the spectacles of pornography and the Vietnam War, it is no coincidence that figures as diverse as Jean Baudrillard, Philip Gourevitch, and Slavoj Žižek continue to rely on optical discourses to frame their discussions of the abject realities of our historical present. As W.J.T. Mitchell maintains:

Since 9/11, an intense new epoch in the pictorial turn has opened up, a “war on terror” triggered by and waged against images. To call this a war of or on images is in no way to deny its reality or to minimise the real physical



suffering it entails. It is, rather, to take a realistic view of terrorism as a form of psychological warfare, specifically a use of images, and especially images of destruction, to traumatise the collective nervous system via mass media and turn the imagination against itself.

(Costello & Willsdon 2008: 185)

Like Mitchell, Baudrillard sees “[the] bad conscience of the entire West ... crystallised in these [Abu Ghraib] images. The whole West is contained in the burst of the sadistic laughter of the American soldiers ... the excessiveness of a power designating itself as abject and pornographic” (2005: 207). If Baudrillard’s use of “pornographic” differs from Sontag’s and Herr’s, in that many of the Abu Ghraib photographs were imitative of pornography, I use “The Vietnam Project” as a fulcrum for a contrapuntal discussion of the relations between Vietnam and the “War on Terror”. Whilst commentators have suggested how novels such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life & Times of Michael K* foreshadow debates ranging from the excesses of sovereign power to detainee abuse scandals to the treatment of “bare life” in a geopolitical reality for which the “camp” becomes a defining chronotope, *Dusklands* has somewhat flown under the critical radar.<sup>1</sup> My central argument is that its various preoccupations with “virtual”, because mediated, trauma, as well as the body that has been both wounded and is capable of wounding, has peculiar resonance. When it comes to war photography and/as a form of pornography, Coetzee anticipates what Sontag, Herr and others would turn their attention to more explicitly towards the end of the 70s, as well as many contemporary debates.<sup>2</sup> If “The Vietnam Project” reads differently when considered in relation to some of these post-9/11 discourses, I also explore how the rhetorical force of Coetzee’s narrative suggests its prophetic qualities. Seen in this light, Griselda Pollock’s question assumes particular significance: “[D]oes/Can the photograph pass its image of [an] event onto us as trauma or are ‘we’, its imagined viewer, saved/protected/positioned by the gap that yawns between the execution and the place of viewing mediated by the space of composition?” (Costello & Willsdon 2008: 221). The obvious precursor to an age characterised by twenty-four-hour news coverage, embedded war reporting, instantaneous

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1. On the “camp”, see Bulent, Diken & Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the Camp* (2005). On *Dusklands*, see “History, Mythography and Colonial Fictions”, in Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* (1996) and “The Labyrinth of My History”: *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* in David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee, South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1995).
  2. For an alternative reading of the “war-porn” debate, see Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007: 30-35).

communication via social networking and multi-media image overload is Vietnam. In what follows, therefore, I speculate on answers to Pollock’s question by considering how Coetzee’s novella “speak[s] with the voice of things to come”.<sup>3</sup>

## Framing Coetzee and Trauma

In their introduction to *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research*, Shohshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandell maintain that “[f]rom an earlier focus on the interpersonal aspects of trauma, including child abuse and domestic violence, traumatic experiences have taken on a political and social dimension, for example, the events of 9/11, the war on terror, and combat trauma associated with recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2012: vii). Building on this, I suggest that part of the enduring power of “The Vietnam Project” stems from its exploration of the interstices between interpersonal and socio-political traumas. Whilst it appears to be preoccupied, as so many war movies and PTDS (post-traumatic stress disorder) studies have been, with how and why those battles waged in a geo-political “beyond” are domesticated, the novella, as Marion Gibson maintains, sees Coetzee “[inverting] the 1970s stereotype of the Vietnam veteran who brings the war home with him (Smith 2004: 155-156). To supplement Gibson’s argument, I consider how Coetzee’s decision to orient the narrative around a non-combatant anticipates contemporary debates concerning trauma, its many aftermaths and various mediations.

Eugene Dawn, protagonist and narrator of “The Vietnam Project”, is a foot soldier in the shadow-army responsible for manipulating the discourses of war. His role, as part of the “New Life Project”, is to produce a report on psychological operations and propaganda in relation to Vietnam:

This report is being drawn up in early 1973 as we enter upon Phase IV of the war, a phase during which the propaganda arm will play a complex and crucially important role. It is projected that, depending upon domestic political factors, Phase IV will last until either mid-1974 or early 1977. Thereafter there will be a sharp remilitarization of the conflict (Phase V), followed by a police/civilian reconstruction effort (Phase VI).

(D 19)

If Dawn’s militaristic vision prophesies conflict trajectories in twenty-first-century Afghanistan and Iraq, he is defined, if not consumed, by his scholarly endeavours. Rather than the claustrophobic Vietnamese jungles depicted in *Dispatches*, Dawn’s battleground is the dusty labyrinths of those

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3. J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (1985: 29). All subsequent references will be cited as *D* in the text.



research libraries and archives located at the core of America's military-industrial complex. Amongst the narrative's many other qualities, it is Coetzee's fascination with the complexities and complicities of military engagement and its discursive representations that continues to capture the reader's imagination. Accordingly, it also intersects with some key concerns of contemporary scholarship, such as Judith Butler's *Frames of War*. For Butler, "there is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalise its own operation" (2010: 29). Much of her study discusses the camera as an "instrument of war" (2010: xi). It is an idea that haunts Coetzee throughout this early novella.

At the heart of Coetzee's concerns with violent voyeurism, the contested borders between abjection and titillation and the virtual and/or hyper-reality of trauma is the fleshy materiality of human bodies, invariably inscribed with pain. If, as Roger Luckhurst suggests "meanings of trauma have stalled somewhere between the physical and the psychical" (2008: 3), sections such as the following suggest how Dawn's narrative probes the interstices of both realms:

There is no doubt that I am a sick man. Vietnam has cost me too much. I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding. Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach .... At other times I imagine a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes.

(D 32)

If passages such as these echo Sontag's reaction to viewing abject images ("something is still crying"), the economy of Coetzee's prose augments its visceral intensity. Wounding and wounded tropes are invoked that both correspond with trauma's etymological origins, as well as various studies of Vietnam and its traumatised aftermaths (see, e.g. Sonnenberg, Blank & Talbott (1985)). For Keith Beattie, for example, "the wound" and "healing" have developed as the framework for interpreting the consequences of the Vietnam War, whether those consequences are seen as political, economic, social, or psychological (1990: 38). To return to Pollock's question, "The Vietnam Project" provides a compelling supplement to these debates because of the peculiar context in which Dawn uses the wound metaphor. One of the central issues it wrestles with is how far the consumption of virtual trauma wounds the viewer him-/herself. Dawn's image of "a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes" assumes great significance. It corresponds with the attraction/revulsion dialectic that shapes Sontag's and Herr's encounters with war photography, for which the experience of viewing pornography, as well as the aftermath of the seen counters, provides the most enabling, fantasy-inducing, analogy. Crucially, however, as Sontag asserts in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, an exploration



of the ways in which "images of the repulsive can also allure" is accompanied by lamentation and grief (2003: 85). In "The Vietnam Project", Dawn indulges in various combat fantasies, highlighting the fraught relationship he has with his disconnection from war and its material fallout:

Is it the blocked imperative of action that has caused the war, and my discourse of the war, to back up and poison me? Would I have freed myself if I had been a solider boy and trod upon the Vietnam of my scholarly fantasy? I call down death upon death upon the men of action ... [their war] is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead center of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste ... [he] gnaws my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. I want an end to it! I want my deliverance!

(D 38-39)

Coetzee's decision to include this passage just after Dawn's reflections on wounds and wounding is key. It works against the grain of Beattie's Vietnam-specific sense that "[t]hrough overwork, the 'wound' has become a dead metaphor, a cliché" (1990: 39). In Coetzee's novella, images of wounding, corrosion and betraying bodies are defamiliarised. Dawn's desire for action is recast as a "blocked imperative". With the healthy circulation of blood reimagined as insidious poisoning, it seems a psychosomatic correlative to his existential ennui. "Fantasy" thus remains a keyword in this passage, as it does throughout the narrative. The ambivalent dream/nightmare of spilling blood on the battlefield wrestles with the equally unsettling, because suitably Beckettian, prospect of a discourse without end. If this corresponds with the novella's central dialectic, it also intersects with pressing debates concerning trauma, "postmodern warfare" and its representational framing. In this regard, I take inspiration from Chris Gray's *Postmodern War* (1997), in which he discusses the new realities of conflict conducted across vast geographical distances, as well as the ways in which it is mediated and produced for global image consumers. In both logistical and discursive senses, these debates centre round themes of connection and disconnection (see Gray (1997)).

Before calling for his deliverance, Dawn takes self-congratulatory delight in his detachment from the events he is required to write about: "the physical Vietnam: the insolence of the people ... the eyes of prisoners whom I would no doubt have had to face, watching the camera with naive curiosity, too unconscious to see it as ruler of their destiny ..." (D 16). That this reflection comes at the end of a lengthy section, in which Dawn offers his thoughts on the vicarious thrills of photographic and filmic images, is as revealing as it is disturbing. Accordingly, it is the idea that the camera is "ruler of [Vietnamese] destiny" that is most provocative. If this chimes with Fredric Jameson's sense of Vietnam as mediated event, the tragic irony of Dawn's statement only becomes clearer as the narrative progresses. The key

issue concerns the extent to which the camera and its images “rule over” him. In subtle and suggestive ways, Coetzee asks his reader to consider how far this augments the dolorous wound behind his narrator’s eyes. Seen in terms of the war photography/pornography dialectic, Dawn’s eruptive, sexually saturated reflections are strategically discomfiting: “[I]t bursts upon me anew that the world still takes the trouble to expose itself to me in images, and I shake with fresh excitement” (*D* 16).

## Freeze-framing the Unruly Body

In “The Vietnam Project”, bodies are unruly terrains to be mapped and, in suitably Foucauldian ways, disciplined. In terms of the connection between Dawn’s corporeal and photographic musings, the implication is that the titillating freeze-frames provide imagistic compensation for his disorderly body, as well as experiences of profound sexual alienation. The significance of Coetzee’s decision to anchor such reflections at an embodied level, before exploring the effects of the quasi-pornographic Vietnam photographs, becomes apparent only later in the text:

On evenings when the sober edge of reality is sharpest, when my assembled props feel most like notions out of books (my home, for example, out of a La Jolla decor catalog ...), I find my hand creeping toward the briefcase at the foot of my desk ... as toward an encounter of delicious shame. I uncover my photographs and leaf through them again. I tremble and sweat, my blood pounds, I am unstrung and fit this night only for shallow, bilious sleep. Surely, I whisper to myself, if they arouse me like this I am a man and these images of phantoms a subject fit for men!

(*D* 15)

If Dawn feels hemmed in by glossy (un)reality, the “delicious shame” of the carefully exposed photographs offers some form of relief and release, in turn suggesting what rustles behind the curtains of American suburbia. When they are considered alongside earlier reflections on his unruly body, the reader appreciates how the images allow Dawn to indulge his fantasy of inhabiting another’s skin (*D* 5), slipping the shackles, however fleetingly, of those more sanitised versions of self with which he wrestles, both within and without. As with “fantasy”, “bilious” and “phantom” recur at strategic points. They invariably speak of a body that defies Dawn (“bilious”), whilst also relating to conceptions of the enemy, because they function as simulacral “other” (“phantom”): “Out of their holy fire the images sing to me, drawing me on and on into their thin phantom world” (*D* 34).<sup>4</sup> For a

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4. In this latter sense, it once more foreshadows Sontag’s notion of a “phantom ‘War on Terror’” (2007: 121).



text preoccupied with viewing trauma, this final musical analogy suggests that the echoes of such imagistic encounters will linger, for protagonist, reader and the body politic more broadly.

If Dawn's Vietnam images sing to him, however discomfiting their song, it is vital that the revolting body, in the multiple senses of that term, is foregrounded from the outset:

Hemmed in with walls of books, I should be in paradise. But my body betrays me .... My eyeballs ache, my mouth constricts .... From head to foot I am the subject of a revolting body. Only the organs of my abdomen keep their blind freedom: the liver, the pancreas, the gut, and of course the heart, squelching against one another like unborn octuplets.

(D 7)

This early passage establishes a corporeal continuum that will slip, slide and intensify as the narrative develops. The reader is invited to consider connections between the unease Dawn feels towards his own physicality here and the vicarious thrills he derives from the Vietnam images. References to aching eyeballs and blind freedom complement those concerns with the politics of perception that frame the novella. Just as Dawn's undisciplined body betrays the order he craves in various other aspects of his life, so too is he drawn towards that which he should find abject and objectionable. The parallels with contemporary, post-Abu Ghraib discourses are pronounced. With the discomfiting juxtaposition of Dawn's professional and personal selves, Coetzee sets the stage for reflections on the mediatization of war, pornography and trauma as spectacle.

## Imagining Shared Precariousness

At various, strategic moments throughout “The Vietnam Project”. Coetzee offers his narrator up as a target of mockery. Dawn is either unable or unwilling to acknowledge that the critiques he offers of others are just as, if not more, applicable to his own neuroses. This is particularly apparent in his reflections on his wife Marilyn, as shown by the following, heavily ironic comment: “[She] is by character a masturbator who needs steady mechanical friction to generate on the inner walls of her eyes those fantasies of enslavement which eventually squeeze a groan and shudder out of her” (D 12). Whilst Dawn speculates in this instance that Marilyn is sleeping with other men, it is the manner in which he plays with the central connection/disconnection motif that is most revealing, with the reader obliged to consider how far the Vietnamese photographs morph into the very “fantasies of enslavement which eventually squeeze a groan and shudder out of [him]”.



If, however, Dawn's critique of his wife as masturbatory automaton is pure projection, the debates clustered around war photography and/as pornography become even more compelling when considered in terms of Butler's notion of "shared precariousness" (2010: xvi). She maintains that "[if] the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for ... [the] rethinking of responsibility, it is precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition" (2010: 33). This is enabling when it comes to exploring how Dawn frames the images, as well as the wounding discourse surrounding them. To consider how this argument based on shared precariousness resonates with developments in contemporary trauma studies, I compare two pivotal moments in "The Vietnam Project". In the first, Dawn reflects on a photograph featuring Special Forces' sergeants Berry and Wilson, holding aloft the heads of dead Vietnamese:

For those of us who have entertained the fearful suspicion that the features of the dead slip and slide ... it is heartening to see that, marmoreally severe, these faces are as well-defined as the faces of sleepers, and the mouths decently shut. They have died well. (Nevertheless, I find something ridiculous about a severed head. One's heartstrings may be tugged by photographs of weeping women come to claim the bodies of their slain ... but can one say the same of a mother with her son's head in a sack, carrying it off like a small purchase from the supermarket? I giggle.)

(D 15-16)

If passages such as these showcase the defamiliarising intensity of "The Vietnam Project", they can again be read alongside Herr's *Dispatches*, in which reflections on the "feeling of being a spectator to something [the war] that was part game, part show" remain so pronounced (1977: 138).<sup>5</sup> Dawn is comforted by the idea that the bodies of the dead appear reasonably stable texts. If the simile is wholly inappropriate (the dead are sleepers who will never awaken), some "heart" can be taken from the closure of their dead mouths. Left to gape open, they would be wounded, as well as wounding, reminders of the horrors of conflict and its aftermaths. As Baudrillard maintains, the very act of beheading results from "the head [being] considered the site of consciousness ... it is thought that bodies with heads would pose ethical and psychological problems" (2000: 4). Alongside this, Dawn's reliance on parentheses intensifies his already disconcerting speculations. The true impact of the "giggling" detail, however, comes from

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5. "There were hundreds of these albums in Vietnam, thousands, and they all seemed to contain the same pictures ... a picture of a Marine holding an eye or maybe two ears or, as in the case of a guy I knew near Pleiku, a whole necklace made of ears, "love beads" as its owner called them; and the one we were looking at now, the dead Viet Cong girl with her pyjamas stripped off and her legs raised stiffly in the air" (Herr 1977: 160-161).



a metaphor that leaves the body in pieces. Equally significant is the gesture towards consumerism. If the severed head resembles a purchase, the unanswered and therefore traumatic question concerns the process by which the mother takes true ownership of it and all it signifies. It is the relationship between this fleshy fissuring and the various figurative associations of disconnection that provides a bridge to a much later episode in Dawn's narrative.

Having, in true Beckettian style, spent most of his time discussing the possibility of doing something, Dawn kidnaps his son Martin. If this action heralds the novella's dramatic denouement, it also invites the reader to consider how it corresponds with prior reflections on corporeality, conflict and its mediatisation. Seen in this light, Dawn's description of wounding Martin is suitably unsettling:

Holding it like a pencil, I push the knife in. The child kicks and flails. A long, flat ice-sheet of sound takes place ...

The ball of my thumb still carries the memory of the skin popping ... the fruit-knife is in and will not go much further on account of the haft.

Amazing. I have been dealt a terrible blow. How could that happen? I am utterly out of control.

(D 42)

Dawn's final, narcissistic reference suggests that he is a prototype for a host of self-absorbed Coetzeean protagonists. His reflections, of course, are all the more discomfiting as the action itself, to use Luckhurst's (2008: 3) definition of trauma, has "breached" a series of borders, literal and figurative, corporeal and ethical. The Oedipal musings that frame Dawn's theories on propaganda and psychological warfare are chillingly recast here. The archetype of the benign, protective father is replaced by the authoritarian figurehead who, when called upon, impresses his power on the flesh of his subjects, represented here by Martin. The knife is imagined as a pencil scoring the boy's parchment-like skin. Rather than simply suggesting that Dawn's quasi-pornographic fixation on the Vietnam images has led to a rupture between his understanding of action and reaction, this incident can be interpreted by using Butler's paradigm of precariousness. The suggestion is that it is Dawn's failure to acknowledge the shared precariousness that unites his own physical and psychical being with others, whether this be the beheaded corpses frozen in the photographs or the fleshy and therefore fragile reality of his son's body, which allows him to inflict pain in this way. In this regard, the one, truly violent act in Dawn's narrative might be read in light of Jonathan Shay's sense that "[t]rauma narrative confronts the moral adult with the fragility of the body". He continues that "the social morality of "what's right", what Homer called *thémis*, is the normal adult's cloak of safety. The trauma narrative of every person with PTSD and character damage is a challenge to the rightness of the social order, to the



trustworthiness of *thémis*. To hear and believe is to feel *unsafe*. It is to know the fragility of goodness” (1995: 193). Whilst the participants in Shay’s study were combat veterans, I suggest that these insights allow us to think about the mediation of trauma with which “The Vietnam Project” is so centrally concerned. Transpose this into the post-Abu Ghraib context explored in *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), amongst other studies, and we might supplement “hear and believe” with “see”. Some of the necessarily disquieting questions this substitution raises concern the extent to which the act of viewing such images makes viewers feel “unsafe”, precisely because it places the fragility of their own “goodness” on trial. As Mitchell maintains in relation to photographs of detainee abuse, “[we] have no choice but to face these images for whatever shocks of recognition they may provide” (2005: 305). Rereading “The Vietnam Project” in a post-9/11 context, its “shocks of recognition” resound anew today.

Before puncturing Martin’s skin, Dawn reflects on a life framed by various forms of mediated reality, whether through scholarly books or war photographs: “There is no doubt that contact with reality can be invigorating. I hope that firm and prolonged intercourse with reality, if I can manage it, will have a good effect on my character as well as my health, and perhaps even improve my writing” (*D* 36). If the association between improved character, health and writing speaks to Dawn’s various quixotic fixations, the notion of an “intercourse” with reality, as well as the accompanying caveat “if I can manage it”, is particularly revealing. As in the sexual and combat arenas, this intercourse may be profoundly underwhelming. Whilst Dawn mocks the psychoanalytic impulses of his doctors, Coetzee invites the reader to explore what is effectively his narrator’s traumatised relationship with reality in terms of both his frustrated fantasies of becoming a soldier and his experiences as “a bookish child” (*D* 30). Approached in this way, intriguing parallels exist between Dawn’s youthful experiences with certain forms of hyper-reality and his subsequent work on propaganda and psychological warfare:

I was brought up on comic-books (I was brought up on books of all kinds). Enthralled once to monsters bound into the boots, belts, masks, and costumes of their heroic individualism, I am now become Herakles roasting in his poisoned shirt. For the American monster-hero there is relief: every sixteen pages the earthly paradise returns and its masked savior can revert to pale-faced citizen. Whereas Herakles, it would seem, burns forever. There are significances in these stories that pour out of me, but I am tired. They may be clues, I put them down.

(*D* 32)

If Coetzee invokes a trope that will become increasingly prominent in his fiction (the befuddled protagonist who cannot fully comprehend what is before him), it falls to the reader to piece meaning together. In “The



Vietnam Project", this compels us to connect apparently disconnected spheres. In the case of Eugene Dawn, these disconnections concern those intimately personal reflections, whether involving his experiences of childhood, marriage and/or parenthood, all of which are characterised by differing degrees of unfulfilment, and those broadly political speculations that cluster around the Vietnam War and its mediatisation.

### **"If you didn't see it, it didn't happen"**

When Dawn reflects on the peculiar "achievements" of and lessons learned from Vietnam, his voice is once more incisive: "Atrocity charges are empty when they cannot be proved. 95% of the villages we wiped off the map were never on it" (*D* 22). If this again demonstrates Coetzee's fascination with discourse and its relations with power, it also reminds us of his original motivation for pairing "The Vietnam Project" with the more identifiably "colonial" "narrative of Jakobus Coetzee": "What was more immediately behind [*Dusklands*] was the spectacle of what was going on in Vietnam and my gathering sense, as I read back in South African history but more particularly in the annals of exploitation of southern Africa, of what had been going on there" (Coetzee in Kossew 1996: 33). As "The Vietnam Project" reminds us, writing is premised on the ability to erase. If bodies and their identities are not framed by dominant discourses, they effectively do not exist. The resonance of these debates, legalistic, ethical and militaristic remains pronounced. In terms of the novella's enduring concern with corporeality and inscription, Dawn's visceral rhetoric corresponds with many of the Vietnam War's dominant tropes. If Communism was an insidious disease to be countered, the real challenge facing the United States was hegemonic: how to win hearts and minds. As it was then, the argument might go, so it is now. When reflecting on how and where things might have gone awry, Dawn asks: "[I]s there a factor in the psychic and psychosocial constitution of the insurgent population that makes it resistant to penetration by our programs? ... how can we make our programs more penetrant?" (*D* 19-20). As with his wounding of Martin's body, Dawn presents the process by which authority is inscribed on a foreign entity, be it an individual, a collective or the body politic itself, in purposively penetrative terms. Alongside this is the intrinsically biopolitical sense that some bodies are worth more than others, as captured when Dawn speaks of casualty figures "grossly inflated with the non-significant dead" (*D* 23). Certain connections are also implied between Dawn's reaction to the violence he enacts on his son's body and that of spectacular abjection from Vietnam. The suggestion is that it is only through reifying the body in pain that certain actions become permissible. This corresponds with David Healy's notion of "psychic numbing – a feeling of being detached from or removed from



others” (1993: 106). Coetzee’s peculiar preoccupation in “The Vietnam Project”, however, appears to be the extent to which desired detachment or disconnection from the bodies of those on whom that violence is enacted, and/or “psychic numbing” on the part of those enacting or viewing violence, is betrayed at a very fundamental level. This is illustrated by the various pronominal tussles that pepper the narrative.

As the novella develops, its shifting pronouns assume greater significance. Coetzee again uses Dawn to defamiliarise the notion of who/what guides contemporary warfare. The following, for instance, is strikingly prophetic: “Behind their desks across the breadth of America wait an army of young men, out of fashion like me. We wear dark suits and thick lenses .... It is we who will inherit America, in due course. We are patient. We wait our turn” (*D* 27). Here, collective pronouns oblige the reader to frame Dawn’s narcissistic war fantasies more broadly. If the automaton-like descriptions anticipate Colonel Joll in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, equally unsettling are the assuredly staccato sentences. There is no question that this shadow squad are amassing behind their desks, preparing for the takeover to come. From this point, the narrator invokes the second-person pronoun. The reader duly becomes implicated in Dawn’s discomfiting reflections:

If you are moved by the courage of those who have taken up arms, look into your heart: an honest eye will see that it is not your best self which is moved .... The dark self strives toward humiliation and turmoil, the bright self toward obedience and order. The dark self sickens the bright self with doubts and qualms. I know. It is his poison which is eating me.

(*D* 27)

Dawn draws on his quasi-schizophrenic experiences, again relying on tropes of poisoning to capture his conflicted sense of self. Fast-forward thirty or so years to debates concerning contemporary detainee abuse, and Dawn’s speculations echo anew. To pursue the analogy of bright and dark selves, it follows that the obedient and orderly self would dismiss the images and all they represent as the aberrance of “a few bad apples”. Revisiting “The Vietnam Project”, however, the more provocative suggestion is that the dark self, a part of rather than apart from us all, is resolute in battle, boasting an armoury of “doubts and qualms”. The motif of poisoning and its potential associations with trauma once again intersects with Beattie’s critique of an evasive overreliance on wounding motifs:

The fact that during and after the war Americans were unavoidably confronted with physical disability in the form of 153,000 physically wounded veterans together with 58,000 mortally wounded may have impressed the concept of wounding upon the popular conscience. The result of the shift in metaphors from contagion to cancer is the implication that the body politic is now no longer threatened by external infection but rather is subject to internal illness. Reversing this, the wound trope re-establishes an



outside agent .... Contrary to the many assertions that the nation lost its innocence fighting the war in Vietnam it can be seen that this denial of responsibility reasserts American innocence.

(Beattie 1990: 40)

If “The Vietnam Project” “speak[s] with the voice of things to come”, it does so by interrogating American innocence, whilst also anticipating the potentially traumatic fallout of such an interrogation.

In the situations outlined above, Dawn appears unable to staunch the corrosive flow of poison. His ontological angst is imagined as taking a physical toll. In terms of the particular discourse surrounding the Vietnam War and its aftermath, this once more returns us to metaphors of gaping, arguably self-inflicted wounds that refuse to heal, both individually and collectively. Superimposed on more contemporary geopolitical events, the truly traumatic questions raised by detainee abuse scandals and their media regurgitation concern the extent to which their “poison” is reflective of a culture of spectacle and abjection. As Mitchell argues, the American military is superseded in touching the lives of everyone framed by “the age of the biodigital picture”: “there is something more to be learned from these pictures than the story of what happened at Abu Ghraib, and who is to blame for it .... We own [these images], and must own up to what they tell us about who we are, and what we are becoming” (Costello & Willsdon 2008: 206). If, to supplement Mitchell and Beattie, trauma concerns the extent to which certain borders are breached, as well as the invariably anguished process by which bodies and psyches come to terms with the extent of and fallout from that breaching, it is constituted as traumatic precisely because of the sobering reality with which it confronts us. Dawn’s warring sense of self, framed somewhere between the titillation and revulsion caused by his various encounters with war pornography, metonymically captures those debates entered into immediately post-9/11 and still abiding ten years later.

In light of the above, the final part of Dawn’s long reflection is multiply revealing. Having negotiated references to both “we” and “you”, the reader comes up against the all-conquering “I”:

I am a hero of resistance. I am no less than that, properly understood, in metaphor. Staggering in my bleeding armor, I stand erect, alone on the plain, beset. My papers are in order. I sit neatly and write ... I am a story not of emotion and violence – the illusory war-story of television – but of life itself, life in obedience to which even the simplest organism represses its entropic yearning for the mud and follows the road of evolutionary duty toward the glory of consciousness.

(D 27-28)

At the most immediate level, this seems yet another form of existential compensation. Dawn figures himself as a metaphorical hero, alone yet



ennobled because he has been unable and/or unwilling to take his place on the real battlefield. Once again, visions of the body that is vulnerable to wounding (“bleeding armor”) add substance to this figurative fantasy. Approached from an alternative angle, however, Dawn’s heroic self-definition is not quite as absurd as it at first appears. By this, I mean his disquieting ability to probe those corners of the dark self in a way that bids the reader do something similar. Dawn’s final reflections are particularly significant in this regard. The reality of a disturbed and disturbing sense of self is once more offset by a discursive order symbolised by his carefully managed paperwork. Of arguably greater importance, however, is Dawn’s caution against simply conflating his narrative with that of “the illusory war-story of television”. Instead, Dawn maintains it is one that speaks to “life itself”. Beyond hubristic excess, this gives the reader an insight into a conception of existence which, by its very nature, is simultaneously traumatised and traumatising. It is one defined by warlike relations, both within and beyond. For Dawn, it is a battle to repress the self’s “entropic yearning for the mud”. Coetzee’s metaphorical choices are crucial, again corresponding with the depiction of light and dark, orderly and disorderly selves locked in unending battle. In this reflection, the yearning is for the mud rather than dutifully following the road leading beyond it. As everything from advertising campaigns to the live streaming of conflict suggests, our genuinely spectacular culture is one in which the body, in various states of muddied, if not bloodied, abjection, takes centre stage. What “The Vietnam Project” allows, if not compels, the reader to consider is the consequences, traumatic or otherwise, of the saturation and intensification of such media consumption. As Walter Davis maintains, “[i]mage is where the psyche gives itself away, revealing what other ideological formations conceal .... Such images lay bare the fundamental contradictions of a society, arresting both heart and mind because they reveal the disorder that defines a historical situation” (2006: 37).

In the final sections of his narrative, Dawn once again probes the disciplinary and discursive strictures of the institution to which he has been consigned. In terms of developments in contemporary trauma studies, the prescience of the following passage is once more captured by the juxtaposition of the televisual and corporeal spheres:

I gave myself to the war on Vietnam only because I wanted to see it end .... If rebellion ceased we could make our peace with America and live happily again .... Nor do I want to see the children of America poisoned by guilt. Guilt is a black poison .... Guilt was entering our homes through the TV cables. We ate our meals in the glare of that beast’s glass eye from the darkest corner. Good food was being dropped down our throats into puddles of corrosion. It was unnatural to bear such suffering.

(D 48)



In terms of the structural coherence of the novella, it is crucial that Coetzee closes in this way as it reiterates some of Dawn's opening lines: "Conflict brings unhappiness, unhappiness poisons existence" (*D* 1). Indeed, the narrative's circularity might be seen as a comment on the mediation of trauma itself. At the end of Dawn's account, the reader is once again confronted with a protagonist locked in endless retellings of the self. The disquieting suggestion remains: that talking might not mend the wound. Fittingly, Coetzee also foregrounds many of the tropes that have characterised the preceding narrative. Physical and psychical terrains are imagined as precarious, porous and therefore prone to poisoning. Accordingly, Coetzee's treatment of "guilt" prophetically captures some of the defining features of those post-9/11 discourses concerning trauma, both individual and collective. This is seen in Mark Danner's preoccupation with "the garish, spectacular photographs and videos from Abu Ghraib". He uses them to argue that "beyond that bright glare of revelation lies a dark area of unacknowledged clarity" (2005: 10). In light of the argument I have pursued throughout, Danner's description is applicable to "The Vietnam Project".

Dawn's talk of giving himself up to Vietnam is more than a simple play with the notion of war and its sacrifices. The implication is that this foreign combat zone, experienced through photography and television, at first presented itself as a liminal fantasy, only to irrevocably claim something from Dawn. One of the most significant features of the passage, therefore, is the absence of references to Vietnam. When Dawn talks of rebellion ceasing, the reader is unsure whether he is referring to South East Asia, the United States and/or the warring sense of self that has predominated throughout. This is amplified by references to "making peace with America", rather than an external enemy. The ambiguity is vital. When, for instance, Dawn ends with a reference to how "[it] was unnatural to bear such suffering", the reader is uncertain whether he is referring to Vietnamese suffering or the toll taken by the imagistic regurgitation of that suffering within American homes. This once again corresponds with Herr's sense that "in back of every column of print you read about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; ... [it] held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after-image that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told" (1977: 176).

In comparison with those descriptions of abject "enemy" bodies that litter earlier sections of the novella, images of wounded or humiliated Vietnamese are conspicuous by their absence at its close. Here, guilt is a black poison, threatening to overwhelm the body of the witness, both individually and collectively. Even more intriguing, given the attempts of subsequent administrations to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam in regions as disparate as Latin America, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, is the sense that future generations of Americans will be "poisoned by guilt". A forerunner



to *Foe*, the passage suggests how and why Coetzee is preoccupied with Vietnam as a form of individual and collective trauma that ultimately has/had little to do with an external enemy. As such, I maintain that “The Vietnam Project” is, in provocative ways, centrally concerned with the idea that guilt and the trauma of that guilt “chuckle[s]” within.

## Conclusion

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag bids her reader to consider the ways in which “cameras are fantasy machines whose use is addictive .... Just as the camera is the sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time”. She goes on to outline a suitably ambivalent hope that “people might learn to act out more of their aggressions with cameras and fewer with guns, with the price being an even more image-choked world” ([1977]2002: 14-15). In *Dispatches*, Michael Herr reflects:

I went [to Vietnam] behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes. Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are.

(Herr 1977: 24)

Throughout my analysis of Coetzee's “The Vietnam Project”, I have suggested that his early novella makes for provocative reading in an increasingly “image-choked world”, where the responsibility for seeing remains as grave as it did when the text was first published. As Michael Bell maintains in *Open Secrets: Literature, Education and Authority from J.-J. Rousseau to J.M. Coetzee*, “[we] might all wish to live in a simpler world, and we need the motivating focus of simple convictions, but Coetzee is bleakly aware of the noumenal core of the moral self” (2007: 232). To supplement Sontag, Herr, and Bell, Gourevitch's comment on photography might be usefully transposed to frame “The Vietnam Project” as a generative, because interrogative, story: “[P]hotographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation. Looked at in this way, as evidence of something beyond itself, a photograph can best be understood not as an answer or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions” (2008: 148).

Taking inspiration from Gourevitch, I feel it is appropriate to conclude with a final citation. If directed principally at Dawn’s doctors, it sees Coetzee passing metatextual comment on “The Vietnam Project”, whilst also making demands on his reader:

I watch their eyes and think: you want to know what makes me tick, and when you discover it you will rip it out and discard me. My secret is what makes me strong. But will you ever win it? When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like, say, the ball in the toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round and will not die.

(D 48)

Dawn’s description of his narrative as enigmatic body, refusing to reveal its defining secret, resonates with “The Vietnam Project” as a whole. His robust, characteristically fleshy rhetoric remains essential. Throughout this analysis, I have revisited Coetzee’s novella, not with the intention of hacking into its “chest of treasures” but to consider how some of its prophetic secrets might be unlocked through close readings informed by interventions concerning the events of Vietnam, 9/11 and their traumatic aftermaths. In framing “The Vietnam Project” as a text that “speak[s] with the voice of things to come”, I have suggested how and why it “will not die” anytime soon.

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**John Masterson**

University of the Witwatersrand

john.masterson@wits.ac.za