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## *THE IRAQ WAR: FROM POLITICAL ARGUMENT TO FICTIONAL DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *neo-conservatism; the fatality count effect; two American cultures; history and rhetoric; the "poetic war" concept; heterotopia of purification; ritualized violence; alternate reality; the individual's war experience.*

**Abstract:** *Of all the military conflicts the U.S. has been engaged in since 1941, the Iraq War enjoys in America the unwanted fame of being the most disfavoured, together with the Vietnam one, and of dividing the American nation sharply between its two main cultures. The present paper brings together, as in a mirror, the media discourse related to the Iraq campaign and the fictional representation of the same event. The argumentative texts have commonly taken a determined political stand about it, expressing anger, disappointment, stupefaction and, more seldom, approval and support. The two representative American fictions discussed here, authored by Don DeLillo and Paul Auster, are focused rather on the individual's experience of the Iraq War and adopt a much more complex and nuanced attitude towards this pivotal event in recent history.*

The temptation to pass judgment on currently developing events is inherent in human nature, even before one gets a more or less documented view on their motivations, unfolding and consequences. Equally tempting is the other response to current debatable issues, namely turning them into personal *narrative* accounts, which function as mechanisms of psychological sublimation and sometimes assume artistic forms. The more so in the case of a state of warfare, such as the one in which the Americans found themselves rather suddenly in March 2003: though the "War on Terror" had been a phrase often used by the Bush administration after Sept. 11, 2001, it remained a rather abstract notion which did not involve many people directly.

After "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was launched against Saddam Hussein's regime, there was a flow of commentaries of all types, sizes and political orientations in American mass media, increasing every month in sharpness and polarization, while the number of American casualties was growing and the chaos in Iraq seemed to become unstoppable. Shock and frustration were the prevailing feelings, but vigorous support for the administration was also widely present in newspaper articles and TV shows. As for literary and artistic discourses, while poets were present in the public arena from the early

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stages of the conflict, mostly expressing their rage against "Bush's war",<sup>2</sup> the first American feature films inspired from that event were released in 2006 and 2007, and novels on the subject appeared even later.

Apart from some transient remarks, in this paper I am not going to refer to international responses to the Iraq War, which but naturally vary extremely much depending on the geographical zones and the political orientations within the local cultures. Of course, the commentaries and artistic reflections in Western countries went along main lines similar with the American ones. I'll only allow one or two exceptions, such as the discourse of the Romanian mass media, which may serve as a counterpart to the orientations of American newspapers and reviews.

In its first part this paper will survey the discursive positions adopted by political columnists, historians and writers in various magazines and journals, while in the second section it will examine the fictional echoes of the Iraq War in two representative American novels written by Paul Auster and Don DeLillo - *Man in the Dark*, and, respectively, *Point Omega*.<sup>3</sup>

"Distance has the same effect on the mind and on the eye", said Samuel Johnson, referring to our perspective on past and future events; he means that whatever we leave behind is always lessening, but, I will add, the farther we get, the more global and less biased our view becomes. Temporal distance may preclude the occurrence of hasty judgments; the opposite is, probably, the risk taken by the political commentators on the Iraq War (both pro and against) caught in the whirlwind of its unfolding. As an example showing the importance of perspective in political matters, we may think of President Harry Truman's case: while at the end of his term his general approval rating was extremely low, later on commentators, historians and the public in general began to revise their opinions and he is now ranked as one of the first ten presidents in American history. Future historians will certainly consider the extremely controversial Iraq War in the context of both its direct consequences, and its long-term influence in a world marked by globalizing tendencies as well as deeply dividing cultural lines.

The general discontent with, and anger caused by, the Bush administration's 2003 decision to embark on a second war on the Iraq soil, which was to be felt in a large part of the American journalistic and scholarly commentaries, certainly have their origin in the direct involvement of American ground troops which had as an immediate consequence an increasing number of casualties (the final count mentions about 4,400 Americans killed in action and almost 32,000 wounded). We may compare these figures with the practically zero fatalities among the pilots who participated in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia – an action that allegedly had a similar goal with the Iraq War (and currently with the Allied operations in Libya for that matter), i.e. forcibly removing from power a dictator who does not refrain from massacring his own people. Therefore some commentators can assume that one of the causes of the American mass media's positive

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<sup>2</sup> The title of a poem by Robert Hass.

<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that the British writer Ian McEwan has also written a novel, *Saturday*, published in 2005, which includes hints at the September 11, 2001 attacks and at the Iraq War.

or indifferent attitude concerning the Yugoslavia operation lay in the apparent safety of the military participants, as compared with the huge toll taken by the Iraq conflict. From a sociological point of view we may call this phenomenon the fatality count effect.

Another impossible to neglect direct consequence upon the American public consisted in the whopping financial cost of the war – almost 2 trillion dollars up to the end, which was even aggrandized by the economic crisis that broke out in late 2007. The other statements to be found in the commentaries on Iraq refer less to facts than to interpretations, of moral, political, cultural or philosophical nature, as we are going to see straight away.

The tone of the discourse on this topic ranges from moderate and thoughtful to sarcastic or lambasting, as it reproduces the power relationships and the ideologies in which the author of each text is inscribed.

The traditional conservatives in America should have had a hard time trying to defend their doctrine against some obvious blunders of their younger colleagues, who were in decision-making positions during the 2000's. Thus, while still supporting the old values of GOP, they strongly disapproved of the current policies of the Bush administration, which was regarded as having been captured by the "hawks". Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke's book, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (2005), is a good example in point: in a reserved but critical tone, the authors trace the history of this new circle of radical politicians who were actually leading the country through their influence in the administration, and also the harmful consequences their ideology had on the Americans' life. The general charge brought against them by Halper and Clarke is that they resort to a "discursive representation of reality", by spinning a "web of deception" (202) in order to manipulate the public opinion into supporting the case for war. Borrowing the words of Prof. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the authors mention the leaders' ability to "develop and disseminate frames or interpretations" for the public's and the media's perception of political affairs (202). However, we should remark here that any kind of discourse does interpret and create a reality, function of the author's ideological affiliations. Moreover, Paul Ricoeur tells us that political language is particularly fragile because of the rhetorical load that "situates it in the vulnerable zone between rigorous proof and sophisticated manipulation" (Ricoeur 1987: 38).

The neo-conservatives, according to Halper and Clarke, share a couple of fundamental beliefs, for instance the concept that the choice between good and evil defines not only the human condition, but also political activity; military power is regarded as a decisive factor in the relations between states, and the Middle East and global Islam are the most important items for the U.S. on an international plane. In a Manichaeian manner which reminds us of Gertrude Himmelfarb's notion of two cultures in one (American) nation, this group deplors the moral decay that is caused by an "alien modernist and secular culture" which includes education, the law system, the arts, and so forth. On the contrary, they reject the claims of "peacemongers" and regard the reliance on military power as *the* solution to international tensions. (We may say they believe in the old grand narrative of warfare.)

From earlier studies on war we know that its causes were seen in the course of time as belonging either to nature or to nurture. In an essay dedicated to biological and anthropological theories on this topic, Doyne Dawson mentions first of all the thesis of Thomas Hobbes, which insists that war is inherent in man's nature (*bellum omnium contra omnes*, in the so-called "state of nature"), while also serving the functions of solidarity and the balance of power, then the opposite concept, belonging to J. J. Rousseau, who claimed that warfare was invented by states, for the same reasons, thirdly Thomas R. Malthus's idea that the function of war consists in reducing the population, Herbert Spencer's thesis, which stresses on human evolution as the main function of warfare, the anthropological concept that war is but a dysfunctional historical accident, as well as the modern combinations of these basic positions (Cf. *The Origins of War 1*).

The Iraq War originated, according to Halper and Clarke, in the neo-conservatives' view on the world, a view which is similar to that of Thomas Hobbes, being imbued with pessimism about human nature and societal relations: the latter would be characterized by a "state-of-nature primitivism and conspiracy", in which the Rousseauistic possibility of a social contract becomes illusory (12). The neo-cons have given up the traditional Republican principles of pragmatism and balance which in the past played essential roles in U.S. foreign policy. In other words, we may add, they lack what Ricoeur calls "practical wisdom", the only thing that would save sound politics from the dangers surrounding it (Cf. Dauenhauer, last par.). Actually they are not true conservatives, but belong to the "humanitarian liberal Wilsonian" left, or should rather be called "liberal imperialists", who promote military power to impose their values in international affairs (18).

Halper and Clarke's main point about this war is that it occurred as the result of a pre-existing agenda, and was linked to the 9/11 attacks artificially: in this way a new, altogether discursively-fashioned reality was fabricated. Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were amalgamated into a unique enemy through this "web of deceit", which was possible due to the "contrived neurosis" that prevailed in the post-9/11 period (230). The two authors even claim that the American public opinion would have supported the consequences of the war more easily if the case had been made more truthfully by the administration. They also point out that there did exist dissenting views among those engaged in strategic thinking, and between the civilian analysts and the top military leaders; later on in this paper we are going to glimpse the image of such a dissenting figure in DeLillo's novel *Point Omega*.

In conclusion, from a traditional conservative perspective, the neo-cons managed to deal a severe blow at the older policy of consensus and bipartisan diplomacy that had managed to keep away the Soviet threat during the Cold War and had been based on America's moral authority over its main international adversary, which enslaved its own people, sent a good deal of them to the Gulag, and denied them any freedom of speech, conscience, fear and want.

Another commentator, Eric Alterman, deals with the neo-conservative issue from a quite different perspective, insisting on the Jewish origin of several prominent members of the neo-con group and calling them "hard-liners – Likudniks", that is supporters of the

positions taken by the Israeli Likud right-wing party, which in principle rejects the idea of an independent Palestinian state. Though he admits that the discussion may slip into "subterranean and sometimes anti-Semitic territory", Alterman, a Jewish-American himself, asks the difficult question, "Whose interests come first, America's or Israel's?". His twofold identity is supplemented by another loyalty – to the American left and to its flagship, *The Nation*, whose columnist he is. Torn between his conflicting affiliations, Alterman seemingly chooses to stay loyal to his leftist position and condemn the influence that Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu exerted on those who decided to launch the Iraq War.

Halper and Clarke's views on the Iraq campaign are to a certain extent shared in another moderate conservative article, "Time to Return to the Reagan Doctrine", published by Terence P. Jeffrey in 2007: the author evokes Jeanne Kirkpatrick's comparison between Ronald Reagan's "morally enlightened realism" and the political mistakes of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, who were driven by "unrealistic moralisms" in their military misadventures in Somalia and Haiti, respectively in Iraq. Her idea was that trying to impose liberal democracy in countries not prepared for this change is a risky action: "democratic institutions are especially difficult to maintain, because they make heavy demands on the population" and they depend on local cultural and economic conditions – a statement that can explain some of the early developments in post-communist Romania as well.

In a similar line of thought, the views of the Romanian-American writer Norman Manea on the Iraq campaign are in keeping with his balanced and considerate spirit, but also with his high regard for American democracy: in an interview given to the 22 Romanian journal in 2008, he spoke about the many serious mistakes of the Iraq War's authors, which were caused by their "ignorance and arrogance". Yet, Manea is also appalled by the European and global anti-Americanism which has resulted from this prolonged military conflict: now this feeling has acquired "exuberant" forms, by reducing the "complicated, ever-changing reality of this great country to some easy-selling clichés". In the subtext we might read an implicit objection against the *radical* critics of the administration's policies: thus he insists that the American occupation of Iraq has also exposed the opposite aspect of the reality, and asks the question whether "the other face, that of the non-stop, barbarian and blind slaughter between Muslim minorities [is] more attractive" (Cf. Palade). Norman Manea concludes by expressing his faith in the wise basic structure of the American system and Constitution, which have taken into account the presence of both human vices and virtues.

A host of commentaries published during the Iraq War by authors belonging to the political, journalistic or academic circles were much less tolerant towards the policies of the Bush administration, chastising either the basic decisions and the military management, or the attempts at manipulating the public opinion into supporting the official resolutions and at hiding the ugly aspects of the ongoing American occupation in Iraq.

One good example in point is the article "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory", published by historian

David Hoogland Noon in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, a year after the beginning of the war. It is mainly a sharp critique of the rhetorical maneuvers of George W. Bush and others, who very often used the analogy between that "default symbol of national virtue, the 'good war'" against Hitler, and the current operation in Iraq (343). The specific events of history are turned in this way into eternal myths, used to give credit to current actions and to present them as springing from the past events. Noon quotes Roland Barthes, who stated that such myths "act economically", by "abolishing the complexity of human acts" and turning history into nature (341). History is thus created rhetorically, says Noon. Yet, neither is his own discourse completely free from rhetoric: he asserts metaphorically that Bush used the terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers to "tell a Whitmanesque 'song of myself'" (340), and establishes his own analogy between the president's repeated references to the "lessons of history" and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans' finding evidence in the Old Testament for their struggles and their final triumph (340). There is hardly any persuasion outside rhetoric - that is no news.

David Hoogland Noon insists on the commonplace dualisms that characterized the Second World War's discourse in America (civilization vs. barbarism, democracy versus totalitarianism), which are now just slightly modified by the neo-conservatives to suit the current international situation, yet keeping their moral load: Francis Fukuyama, for instance, reviewed his concept of the "end of history", in an article entitled "Has History Started Again?",<sup>4</sup> by identifying a new conflict of similar import with that of the Cold War, this time between liberal democracy and "Islamofascism" (Cf. Hoogland 352).

All other real or would-be similarities between the occupation of Iraq and World War II cannot justify an overall analogy between these events – that is the underlying claim of the American historian. However, such a political maneuver is not uncommon when politicians want to defend their foreign policies: in a footnote, Noon mentions in passing that the Soviet leaders, too, constantly attempted to enliven their people through the heroization of the war generation. Moreover some of the author's critical statements seemingly remain unfounded: if Osama bin Laden was just a fabricated "Hitlerian reincarnation" (352) which was said to terrorize the world, what is the truth about him? Can indeed the growth of anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism be attributed (solely) to the U.S. policies in Egypt and Afghanistan during the Cold War, as the author suggests at some point? Are the causes of current terrorism so easy to analyze? Although it is thoroughly documented, David Hoogland Noon's biting commentary seems to have been written under the emotional pressure caused by the early moments of the new war.

Dubious analogy is indeed a common rhetorical instrument used by politicians in pushing their case, including the foreign affairs domain. Yet, as we have shown above, we also find it often enough in argumentative texts that are supposed to deconstruct the manipulative tactics of leaders and their spokespersons. In this respect, a perfect example is Jeffrey A. Engel's article subtitled "Truman's Lesson for Bush", published in a 2005 issue of a prestigious Canadian journal. While the premise of the demonstration sounds arguably correct – that is the wrong assumption about the weapons of mass destruction,

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<sup>4</sup> Published in *Policy* 18 (2002).

which motivated the launching of the Iraq War – the remaining part of the analysis relies on superimposing Bush's pro-war rhetoric upon Harry Truman's arguments which, as it is suggested, were solely responsible for the beginning of the Cold War. Both Truman and Bush would be "practitioners of the politics of fear" and would have turned their initial accomplishments into failure because "success often breeds hubris, the handmaiden of tragedy" (2). The differences between the two kinds of threats America was facing – the Soviet-communist one in 1946-1947 and the terrorist one after 2001 – are not relevant for the author of the article. He insists that Truman was overblowing the case and that "Soviet-inspired communism in Greece and Turkey was simply not the clear and present danger the president claimed" (8), which is absolutely untrue, if we just mention some of the author's own remarks referring to the soon-to-follow actions ordered by Joseph Stalin, such as the Berlin blockade, the Czechoslovakian 1948 coup d'état, and so forth. According to Engel's self-contradictory view, Truman's advisors, who insisted on the necessity of the aid package for Britain, France and other Western countries, did not have a real foresight of the Soviet expansionist goals, but would have been urged by domestic political interests only.

Conversely, the rhetoric of those who defended the Iraq campaign could be even harsher sometimes. In an interview given by the military historian Harry Crocker to the *Human Events* journal in 2006, he speaks in short, pungent sentences that sound like irrefutable assertions: his aim is to "bust" some widely-spread "myths" such as the ideas that the Indian would be a noble savage, that the Southern Confederacy was wrong, that America lost the Vietnam War and the Iraq campaign is a disaster, and even that America is a non-imperial power. To such militaristic, radically conservative views, some of which are hardly acceptable even to right-wing intellectuals, Crocker adds some pretty cynical advice to the Bush administration: they must apply in Iraq to a larger extent two basic principles: "divide and conquer" and "reinforce success"; in this way "our job would be done" (1).

Otherwise, the inefficiency of the Iraq War strategists has been observed by many commentators: John McCain's neo-conservative counselor, Robert Kagan, insisted that the Americans did not have enough troops deployed on the ground (neither did they in Afghanistan) and the administration started from the wrong premise that they would not be responsible for managing the local affairs after Saddam Hussein's regime was finished (Cf. Manea, Octavian 1).

This line of criticism was by no means confined to American commentators: on the other side of the Atlantic, the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman also emphasized the Bush administration's grave mistakes in devising the Iraq campaign, such as the inadequacy of the American war machine, the lack of knowledge about the nature and the trump cards of terrorism. The Americans relied solely on military means, which cannot possibly win the war on terrorism, but can only reinforce the latter. Moreover, Bauman observed that generally, this is caused by the fact that they have reversed Carl von Clausewitz's famous statement ("War is ... the continuation of political relations ... by other means"), turning politics into an extension of war (Cf. Bauman 11).

Just in order to bring up another perspective on the American administration's highly controversial campaign in Iraq I will also mention a few positions taken by the Romanian political commentators, as they are illustrative of the differences between the perceptions prevailing in Eastern and respectively Western Europe (and in America): whereas in the U.K., France, Spain and other countries criticism against "Bush's war" dominated the mass media positions, Romanian and other East-European analysts have tended to regard the recent American policies more sympathetically. In the *Observer cultural* Bucharest journal, Alexandru Hâncu published in 2005 an appreciative article about the war reportages produced by the freelance American writer Michael Yon, embedded with the Iraq combat units (in which Yon does not refrain from criticizing the abuses of the U.S. military, but sympathizes with the campaign notwithstanding). The Romanian commentator upholds views that would shock many left-wing Americans: he writes that the Iraq War can easily be lost, as the one in Vietnam was, not in South East Asia, but in America, due to the pressure exerted by the media. Most of the latter do not believe that the existence of tyranny is a threat to democracy: on the contrary the steps taken to stop tyranny are considered as utterly criminal. Hâncu insists that we can only *fight* with those that reject negotiation: communism yesterday, Islamic extremism, today (1). Such views, widely accepted, and published by a prestigious cultural journal, would be blasphemy for many in the U.S., but we should not rush to judge: America has never had the experience of real communism, as Eastern European countries did.

In the political journal 22, which otherwise attempted to adopt a neutral, objective position, Dragoş Paul Aligică expresses similar views in a 2006 article, speaking about the extremely polarized positions of the two main political groups in America – the conservative republicans, for whom publicly remembering the 9/11 attacks means asserting their political identity and reinforcing their electoral status, and, on the other hand, the liberal-democrats, who would like to tone down the commemoration of those events, as for them the war on terrorism is not a main issue. Interestingly, both parts of the American society criticize the manner in which the war is waged, but from different perspectives. In the same journal, Traian Răzvan Ungureanu, a sharp critic of the present-day Western elites, takes a stand from London, where he is residing, soon after the July 2005 terrorist attacks against the public transportation system in the U. K. capital: these elites bury reason, he claims, when they uphold the ideas that terrorism is justified by the Western aggression, the Iraq War is motivated basically by oil-related interests, and the growing insurgency in Iraq would be induced by the foreign aggression, not by sectarian adversity. Shockingly, of course, Ungureanu maintains that these elites have kept their privileges through subversive ideas, which they have the possibility to express in a democratic, egalitarian society: they even sympathized with the Nazis, then with the Soviets, now with the terrorists; in many respects they are in agreement with the leaders of Islamic propaganda, such as al-Zawahiri, in condemning the policies of the Western governments.

Not all Romanian commentators have been so sharp in expressing their opinions about the Iraq War and the context that generated it, though. There are also moderate voices, which emphasize the mistakes made by the American and British governments

during the war, but generally speaking the tone of the Romanian (and other East-European) media has been much more sympathetic towards the options of those who started that campaign. Which shows once more, if it was ever necessary, the role of the political and social context in which moral opinions are generated, and, partly, the role of Power, at all levels, in creating the prevailing discourses. The fatality count effect, which I mentioned earlier, should also be taken into consideration.

The argumentative texts we have surveyed so far are meant to take a determined stand about the Iraq War, to express anger, disappointment, stupefaction, or, much more seldom, approval and support. As I have mentioned before, another kind of approach, the fictional one, has not stayed indifferent either to this crucial historical development, which lasted more than six years and arguably is not completely over even now. We are talking this time about the construction of a representational narrative reality, a figural response to the real world's violence and worries: the overall message that is conveyed through the craft of fiction is way more complex and even fuzzier than the one proposed by the argumentative discourse in general. The two pieces of fiction to which I have chosen to refer here are not war novels proper, neither political novels, but rather studies in the individual responses to states of crisis in the life of a nation. Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* focuses on the aftermath of an American intellectual's experience at the Pentagon during the first part of the Iraq War, and Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* imagines a divergent reality, as an alternate to the real-life overseas war fraught with unspeakable horrors.

DeLillo's novel has the advantage of an analeptic view of things, as it was published in 2010, when the war was almost over in point of military combat. Though the main stakes of *Point Omega* are transhistorical, the story can also be read partially as an incursion into very recent history, which is not uncommon with DeLillo, if we think of other fictions, such as *Libra*, *Falling Man*, and particularly *Underworld*.

The protagonist, Richard Elster, is a hyper-intellectual, specialized in the humanities, who has recently published an article about the complex semantic load of the word "rendition"; though a scholarly philological text, it contains some hints at the "enhanced" interrogation techniques used by the American military on terrorists and Iraqi insurgents ("rendition" also means "surrender"). He tried to find romance and mystery in a word employed as an instrument of state security. After that publication he was invited to take a high position as (probably) an advisor in the defense system, stayed there for two years, among "the tight minds that made the war", and then suddenly departed (18). Although enjoying a high reputation as a scholar, he always felt to be an outsider among the strategy planners and the military analysts with whom he stayed at the same table in the secure conference room. Being even cleared to read classified transcripts, Elster's rather odd, funny job was to "conceptualize [and] apply overarching ideas and principles to things like troop deployment and counter-insurgency", as he ironically describes it (19). Elster belonged among the "metaphysicians" and the "fantasists" in the Pentagon: we may say his job was not very different from that of the king's poet or the leader's sycophants, who have always been expected to utter in adorned phrases what the master

wants to hear. Later on he depicts the atmosphere in those rooms in just two sarcastic words: "bulk and swagger" (19).

Elster's concept of the Iraq campaign had been in keeping with the neo-conservatives' views: he imagined a "haiku war ... a war in three lines ... a set of ideas linked to transient things" (29), and gave the American leaders this poetic image, probably not realizing the cynical load in it, which may remind us of the *blitzkrieg* notion. Now, when his Pentagon experience is over, he realizes that for the military war is something abstract, like sending an army into a place on a map. He admits to have contributed to the creation of a reality – a possible hint at the strategy of embellishing the actual situation on the Iraq front, and at the bright perspectives presented to the American people about the new state that was to be created over there. Yet, Elster claims that this manipulation is normal during a war: "Lying is necessary. The state has to lie. There is no lie in war or in preparation for war that can't be defended." Furthermore, the Pentagon people tried to create "new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability" (28-29). Thus the moral aspect becomes admittedly superfluous in such situations – a view which, though partially justifiable, would fuel the arguments of the administration's critics.

Elster reveals in his sparse talk with his younger friend, Jim Finley, that he still believes in the necessity of the current war. He may be disappointed by the fact that he hoped to be "in the middle of history" only to find himself in a room where all was just statistics, priorities and evaluations. However, as a true conservative, he insists that a great power must act and "retake the future", after it has been struck hard. We, Americans, he contends, cannot let those people (meaning the Islamic terrorists), with their "old despotic traditions" shape "our world, our minds" (30). The distinction between the activists of terrorism and Saddam Hussein's regime, which the critics of the war insisted on so much, is immaterial for him.

DeLillo's picture of this elderly neo-con is at times slightly ironical, but not unsympathetical. Aware of the darker part of his Pentagon experience, Elster decides to withdraw from the world into the Anza Borrego desert, to do and talk nothing and to forget the sickness caused by "News and Traffic". It is not a withdrawal into religious ascetism (as in the case of some of Flannery O'Connor's characters), neither is it done in a spirit of defiance against society (as with some of Sam Shepard's personages). The Pentagon experience simply makes Elster want to live in a different kind of time frame, in a geological time that is a space of "proto-existence". We may deem it a "heterotopia of purification", using Foucault's term (Cf. *Of Other Spaces*), as heat, stillness and distance are the best cure for this ageing, disgruntled man. In the prologue and epilogue of the novel, which might seem to be unrelated to the main story, an unnamed narrator retells his experience of viewing a video-artwork, entitled *Psycho - 24 Hours*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (a video installation that is not fictitious, but was presented there in real life by artist Douglas Gordon in 2006). The Museum spectators view Hitchcock's well-known film *Psycho* presented in extremely slow motion, just two frames per second, so that it takes 24 hours to see it through. All details that pass unnoticed during a normal projection acquire unexpected significances here. Actually there is an

underlying similarity between the experience of viewing this *other* film, *au ralenti*, and Elster's life in the desert house, where "time slows down", and he never knows what day it is, if a minute has passed or an hour, where he does not get old (23-24). We understand that Elster has also seen the video installation in New York: thinking at a cosmic dimension, he compared that experience to watching the universe die over a seven billion years' period. This eschatological moment is present in his mind through the concept of "Point Omega" imagined by the French theologian Teilhard de Chardin as a final moment of consciousness and biology, when a new, perfectly organized complexity will be established. "Back to inorganic matter. This what we want. We want to be stones in the field" (53) – this is how Elster imagines that eschatological moment, in a foreboding way.

Foreboding, because in its third part, the story takes a dark turn: Elster's young daughter, who has joined her father and Jim to spend time together in the South-Californian desert, suddenly disappears, leaving no trace behind. The novel acquires a thriller mood and at this point the protagonist's physical and moral disintegration begins, advancing quickly and irreversibly. Elster believed before this crucial moment that the desert is clairvoyant, that it unravels and reveals things, but now it only makes him feel enclosed, hemmed in, drawing him towards death. Perchance the answer to the enigma in the last third of the story lies just in that state of post-consciousness called "Point Omega", which is translated by Elster into the desire that a human being would feel to finally turn into a piece of stone on a barren land. (Cf. Surdulescu). In postmodern America, the desert is "an ecstatic form of disappearance", as Baudrillard has observed (5).

This is an outstanding fiction, like so many others authored by Don DeLillo. A romance rather than a novel (in Northrop Frye's terms), with blurred, stylized characters, abstract dialogue, enigmatic interconnections and poignant archetypes such as the desert space, *Point Omega* just takes a brush with recent history, to reach wider ontological dimensions. The American critics who expected from DeLillo a sharp, explicit condemnation of the Iraq operation were, no wonder, severely disappointed (Cf. Surdulescu). Yet, Richard Elster's final disintegration cannot be apprehended outside the troubling experience among the people that were conducting a military campaign (in which he strongly believed) as a clean and abstract game of chess. DeLillo's protagonist is the author of a "poetic war" concept, but this aestheticizing of violence, with roots in the old chivalric ethos, will result in a kind of symbolic disappearance.

The other outstanding American writer having authored a novel whose content is linked to the Iraq War, Paul Auster, makes this connection more direct and explicit; by an interesting coincidence, the protagonist of *Man in the Dark* has practically the same age as Richard Elster (around 72), is also associated with the humanities (as a literary critic), and is similarly nagged by thoughts about his past life and the meaning of the current events. August Brill, most probably an alter ego of Auster himself at a later age, was severely injured in a car accident a year before the beginning of the narrative and is confined to the wheelchair. Living now with his daughter in Vermont he tries to fight his chronic insomnia and to brush away his annoying remembrances by telling himself stories created on the spot. Extended talks with his granddaughter, Katya, are just another

way of building for himself a "narrative identity" (to use Ricoeur's phrase), by driving away the ghosts of the past – his own betrayals, weaknesses and failures, as well as some haunting images of human cruelty from the recent time. Thus, if DeLillo's hero aestheticizes warfare, Auster's one purposely narrativizes it.

Going further along this comparative line, we should notice that, unlike Elster, who would have regarded the Iraq campaign as an event foreign to himself (while for some time he enjoyed being one of its ideological authors), August Brill has experienced the atrocity inherent in such a war on an almost personal plane: Katya's former boyfriend, with whom August used to have long conversations at a time, was the victim of kidnapping and a gruesome execution by an Iraqi group of insurgents who videoed the whole macabre scene and sent it on to be watched on the Internet. Ironically, Titus Small had been a sharp opponent of the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq, telling August that it was "the worst political mistake in American history." Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the others were "a gang of fascist crooks" and their place was in jail (172). Nonetheless, after some time he accepted to go and work there as a truck driver for a huge pay. His reasons were mainly moral, he said – just to see the horrible aspects of life and to get rid of the "fucking safe and dreary" existence in New York (173). For Titus, being present on or near the battlefield means to be part of history, and somehow to redeem himself in his own eyes. War is for him a generator of energies, in a Nietzschean spirit, and this may remind us of the Hungarian officer's views, from Liviu Rebreanu's novel "The Forest of the Hanged".

However Titus becomes part of history more than he would have foreseen and, in this sense, dying in his twenties, he shares the fate of Rembrandt's son whose name he is bearing. Katya and her family watch the grisly execution video as if out of an obligation or a sacred duty: Titus's detached head becomes just a bleeding thing, *une nature morte*, as it is being held up by one of the hooded men and its eyes are stabbed out. The boy is no longer quite human, says the narrator: he has become the idea of a person (176). Reminiscent of ancient human sacrifices, such an act is utterly barbaric, it is suggested, and its inclusion in the main story of the novel implies a position of Auster's similar to that of Norman Manea who was speaking of the other aspect that the war revealed, which cannot be ignored – the barbarity of the Islamic insurgents' practices.

The terrorists are aware that the images in such "snuff films" do have a huge impact on the viewers, owing to their implicit rhetoric. As Susan Sontag maintains in a study about the psychological power of violent images,<sup>5</sup> they seem unreal, are imbued with horror, but at the same time exert a kind of irresistible attraction. She quotes George Bataille's depiction of the "ecstatic and unbearable" image of suffering to be seen in a photograph taken in China, in 1910, where a prisoner is executed by gradual chopping (97). The staging of the scene in such photographs (and in snuff films, we must add) is of utmost importance. Sontag mentions the way in which the "counter-revolutionary" Cambodians were put on display by the Khmer Rouge before being shot – a method that was also practiced in Soviet Russia in Stalin's time (62).

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the *Pain of Others*. See Works Cited below.

The extreme, ritualized violence to which Titus falls victim is revealed by the narrator only at the very end of Auster's novel, but it actually haunts August's mind from the first moments of the story. This "reality" in the diegesis obviously draws on some real-life events that occurred in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled, such as the fierce executions of the American businessman Nick Berg, the construction contractor Eugene Armstrong and other foreign workers. Yet, the protagonist of the novel also invents a parallel story-within-a-story that takes place in an alternate reality.<sup>6</sup>

In this "battered, war-ridden world", Brill cannot think up but a reality torn by a terrible military conflict: it is a Second Civil War in America, which began after the highly controversial 2000 presidential election in the U.S., when – in this parallel universe – protests erupted, a new movement led by the New York mayor was founded and secession was declared by 16 states that formed a new union, the Independent States of America (I.S.A.). The new country was recognized by the E.U., Mexico, and so on. In this Civil War turned upside down, it is the North that secedes, while the South (called "the Federals", led by George W. Bush) finally seems to get the upper hand. Until now, there is already a huge number of fatalities – 13 million; yet, no nuclear bomb has been used, the narrator assures the reader. The policies of the new union are in keeping with the most progressive and ecological principles: no meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, universal health insurance, a fourfold increase in teachers' salaries (to make the profession really attractive), free education, strict gun control, elimination of cars and planes, consequently of the dependence on oil, and the utopian list may go on. **The narrator admits that all this is in the realm of fantasy for the time being, as the war is actually ravaging the new country...** (62-63).

It is here, in the inside story, that Paul Auster brings into play the well-known paraphernalia of postmodern techniques and principles which he has always been so fond of: the constructed nature of reality; the metafictional quest for the author, borrowed from Pirandello (in this case Owen Brick – a kind of double of August Brill, who has contrived the inner tale – becomes the main character of the inside story, hired to kill his fictional author and to put the world back on its initial track); the notion of parallel universes (a character quotes Giordano Bruno's claim that there must be an infinite number of worlds, if God is infinite (68)), and the free circulation between these worlds; the hermetic, mentalistic concept that the universe is a mental creation of God; there are also Borgesian suggestions and other postmodern stratagems whose analysis falls outside the scope of this paper. The final result is a powerful narrative, with some highly impressive scenes, even though the general structure appears a bit loose at times.

Setting the point of divergence between the two worlds at the beginning of George W. Bush's first term may suggest Auster's ironic bent towards the former president's activity. In the openly invented story there has been no Iraq War (and no attack against the Twin Towers, for that matter) but the reader may surmise that there can

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<sup>6</sup> A similar narrative technique was used by Auster in another novel, *Travels into the Scriptorium*, where an amnesiac protagonist reads an old manuscript containing a fable about a country called "the Confederation", which is at war with the "Alien Territories".

occur something even worse than that military operation, i.e. an inner, much more destructive war between the currently prevailing cultures, which would definitely bring down that "noble experiment" called America (49).

Notwithstanding, if the initiative of the Iraq campaign is not decried explicitly (as it is not in DeLillo's novel either), the unspeakable horrors of war in general are present at all levels in this complex piece of fiction.

In these two recent novels of the highest rank, the Iraq War is a pivotal event, but the focus is on *the individual's* experience of the current climate, on their illusions, disappointments, worries, shocks and psychological outlets related to wartime. Besides, in the fictional discourse such dramatic events, be they poetic or horrendous, are relegated into a narrative past, which makes them less personal for the reader, at least at an ideological level.

Political analysts, on the other hand, very often ideologically motivated, have been bent on arguing, taking positions about the Iraq campaign, strongly defending or, on the contrary, reprobating the moves of the American and British governments: such commentaries, though representative for the first decade of this century, may often fail the test of time and remain mere documents for the use of future historians. Meanwhile wars of all kinds, civil, inter-nations, or inside our mind, keep flaming around, in this weird, battered world, as we learn from Paul Auster's story.

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## ***A WAR OF WORDS: MODELLING NATIONALIST IDENTITIES IN THE MALVINAS/FALKLANDS WAR***

**Keywords:** *Malvinas/Falklands War; nationalist identities; the media; war discourse; ideology*

**Abstract:** *This paper offers a case study of a situation in which nationalist discourses and power structures combined to construct nationalist identities in the context of the Malvinas /Falklands war, fought in 1982 between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the sovereignty of a small group of islands in the South Atlantic. Nationalisms played a key role in this war, since the prestige of the nation and its territory had to be defended. The paper draws on Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault to study how governing institutions and power groups based their call to war on their own particular version of truth. The British and Argentine media highly supported this truth in different ways. They were a key mechanism in the promotion of nationalist identities during the war, triggering patriotic feelings and serving as a vehicle for political propaganda. There were only a few exceptions that challenged or subverted the official discourse.*

### **Introduction**

The Malvinas/Falklands war was an armed dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina that lasted for 74 days: 2 April-14 June 1982, leaving behind approximately one thousand dead, that is: 255 British, 649 Argentine and 3 civilian islanders. The reason for the war was the claim for sovereignty over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which had been part of the British overseas territories since the eighteenth century though Argentina had always alleged that the archipelago in the South Atlantic belonged to its national territory. Although the war was relatively short and did not involve a great number of losses, it represented an important point in the collective memory of both nations. For the British, it was the last colonial war and one which allowed Margaret Thatcher to stay in power for almost a decade after the British victory. For the Argentine, it was the only war fought and lost in the twentieth century and it brought about the fall of the dictatorship.

This paper aims at analysing how nationalist identities were constructed in the war period by power structures, especially the government with the help of the media. The discourse of patriotism and nationalism created and imposed its own truth about the war, passing these “Tales of War” to the population with the intention of “reconciling” the national public opinion against the “conflictive” Other, understood as the outside enemy from the foreign nation that was threatening the sovereignty of the territory under

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dispute. This contribution also intends to be innovative in presenting the two sides of the question together by comparing and contrasting the same issue in the two countries involved in the battle: Great Britain and Argentina.

### **Ideology and Subjectivity**

Althusser argues that human values, desires and preferences are all inculcated by ideological practice. He calls the process by which individuals become indoctrinated into one or different ideologies “interpellation”. For this mechanism of interpellation to work, an ideology must be presented as a given. In this way, it will be believed and taken for granted as normal. Althusser believes that ideology works by common sense assumptions which he calls obviousness about meaning. For Althusser, “linguists and those who appeal to linguistics for various purposes often run up against difficulties which arise because they ignore the action of the ideological effects in all discourses” (qtd. in Fairclough 84-85).

According to Althusser, this ideological practice works thanks to the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which is formed by the family, the media, educational and religious institutions, among others. These institutions work in a silent way so individuals are not aware of the fact that they are being indoctrinated and manipulated by these tools that powerful groups use in order to maintain power. Althusser claims there is a more visible method to control people, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) formed by the police, the army, the penal system and the law. The RSAs lay down rules and regulations and also a penal system to punish those who do not obey the law. However, the ISAs are much more dangerous than the RSAs since they are subtler; they work through seduction and are able to interpellate without the individual’s awareness. Thus, individuals may believe they are nationalist or patriotic by choice, but following Althusser’s theories, this is not the case. They have been indoctrinated into having such ideologies during their education, upbringing and even later through the media.

This conception of power being top down exclusively was challenged by later poststructuralist thinkers. Michel Foucault, for instance, questioned the belief that power has a centre and that the dominant group or institution victimises and directly oppresses those who suffer from power. This would create a binary of subject / object or oppressor / oppressed. Foucault suggests rather that power is like a network where people who are oppressed are not only victims but can be oppressors as well, they can reproduce power themselves. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* he states that:

Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between everyone who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign's great power over the individual (187).

In *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction* Foucault discusses the meaning and implications of power and its effect on individuals and society. He widens the concept of it, since he believes that power refers not only to the power exercised on society by