

Verfasser der Hausarbeit:  
Marcel Plexnies  
XXX

Germanistik M.A. III

**Michael Herr**  
**as a**  
**New Journalist**

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## **1. Introduction**

It was the time of the Anti-war-movement in the 1960s, the time of the Vietnam War, the time of hippies, the time of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, when even the journalism in the United States got a new significance. Journalism was no longer only an objective mean for public, it became a medium for all those – journalists and novelists – who wanted to express something else than merely pure facts. Feelings, emotions, complete scenarios and everyday habits were now important. The New Journalism gave authors the chance to involve themselves better, but at the same time their readers in the narrated content. Several journalists like Tom Wolfe or Joan Didion represent the New Journalism in their works. Another important representative is Michael Herr. Herr reported as freelancer for the *Esquire* from the Vietnam War. In his book *Dispatches*<sup>1</sup> all his articles are collected.

In this essay I intend to proof the fact that Michael Herr really is a New Journalist. By paying attention to the New Journalism devices Tom Wolfe lays down in his book *The New Journalism*<sup>2</sup> I am going to give a couple of excerpt examples that can be found in *Dispatches*. Deducing from Herr's *Dispatches* this essay ought to show in how far Michael Herr has the right to claim to be a New Journalist. In addition some reviews and critics on Herr and his work will underline the opinion that Herr belongs to this movement. A few critics found in the internet will support this view as well.

## **2. New Journalism devices in Herr's *Dispatches***

The New Journalism is mainly defined by four major devices, provided by Tom Wolfe in his book *The New Journalism*<sup>3</sup>. There are the scene-by-scene construction, the full dialogue recording, the third-person point of view and the habit recording. All these devices should be explained in short in the following:

- Scene-by-scene construction: The story is told by moving on from scene to scene, with the reporter as a kind of witness.
- Full dialogue recording: Dialogues are recorded and reported in their full length to involve the reader as complete as possible.
- Third-person point of view: Scenes are presented through the eyes of a particular character. So the reader should feel to be in this character's mind.

- Habit formation: Habits, customs, gestures, manners, etc. (all referring to the character's outer appearance) are recorded to be symbolic for the people's status life

Now we will see in how far Michael Herr applies these devices to his articles written during his time in Vietnam.

## 2.1 Contextual Usage

Of course, not all passages in *Dispatches* could be mentioned that include devices of New Journalism. But some examples will prove that Herr really resorted to the methods mentioned above.

The scene-by-scene construction, for instance, builds up the whole contextual surface of *Dispatches*. In this case, each chapter is a scene on its own. Considering that the chapters of *Dispatches* originally were articles Herr wrote for particular American magazines, their standard as scenes gets clearer as well. In addition, the first and the last chapter, called "Breathing In" and "Breathing Out", form the story's framework. In between Herr tells of his experience, his and other people's adventures and feelings in Vietnam. Everything seems to be Herr's own experience, as if he went through all these scenes himself. In most cases Herr really did, but there are also a couple of stories and scenarios that he merely knew from narration of other soldiers or journalist colleagues.

The device of full dialogue recording can be found several times throughout all articles/chapters of *Dispatches*. Here only two examples should be considered. The first one is situated in the chapter "Khe Sanh". The soldiers involved in that dialogue discuss about an announcement on the radio<sup>4</sup>. In this passage it is obvious how Herr not only recorded the full dialogue, but also took up the colloquial speech of the soldiers<sup>5</sup>:

*"All right,' Mayhew said. 'Don't believe me. This kid was a clerk. He's over to the TOC yesterday and he heard 'em talking.'*

*'What's the Cav gonna do here? Make this a fuckin' parking lot for helicopters?'"*

The second dialogue passage comes from the chapter “Illumination Rounds”<sup>6</sup>, when Herr talks to a young helicopter gunner about whom he intends to write a story. Here the full dialogue recording effects a better realisation about the young man’s character. The speech he uses lets the reader know that he is quite proud to fight there for his country, for the United States of America. Killing the Vietnamese enemies makes him feel good, proud and even gives him more self-consciousness<sup>7</sup>:

*“Why should we do a story about you?”  
“Cause I’m fuckin’ good,” he said, “n’ that ain’t no shit,  
neither. Got me one hunnert ‘n’ fifty-se’en gooks kilt. ‘N’  
fifty caribou.’ He grinned and stanchd the saliva for a  
second. ‘Them’re all certified,’ he added.”*

As you can see, full dialogue recording provides more than just an information about the character’s speech skills – it is also able to reveal the character’s inner condition and/or character traits.

To find examples for the third-person point view device of New Journalism is more difficult again. But Herr, of course, uses this aspect to narrate some episodes from Vietnam as well. One of the most significant examples in *Dispatches* is the one that tells the reader about a soldier called Davies<sup>8</sup>. Herr describes his ‘normal’ daily life in Vietnam shortly, but at the same time precisely. So, the reader gets the opportunity to imagine the single situations Davies gets into every day. Davies’ life can be seen by the reader through the Eyes of Davies, but with the images the reader has in his own mind, how the reader imagines the environment, the people, the situation<sup>9</sup>:

*“He actually lived in a small two-storey Vietnamese house  
deeper inside Cholon, as far from the papers and the  
regulations as he could get. Every morning he took an  
Army bus with wire-grille windows out to the base and flew  
missions, mostly around War Zone C, along the  
Cambodian border, and most nights he returned to the  
house in Cholon where he lived with his ‘wife’ (whom he’d*

*found in one of the bars) and some other Vietnamese who were said to be the girl's family."*

Throughout the whole book Herr again and again depicts soldiers, colleagues and other impressive people in this way. But not all those passages have such a strong point of view character like this about Davies.

And even the last and – like Wolfe states – *"the least understood"*<sup>10</sup> device of New Journalism can be found in Herr's articles. In the passage I want to pay attention to, Herr tells the reader about a soldier and his tattoos, the decoration of his helmet and his jacket and his habits to handle with all these features of his outer appearance<sup>11</sup>:

*"He had tattooed the name MARLENE on his upper arm, and on his helmet there was the name JUDY, and he said, 'Yeah, well, Judy knows all about Marlene. That's cool, there's no sweat there.'*

As you can see, Herr complies with all the four major devices of New Journalism. And the examples provided above are merely deputy for a couple of excerpts you may discover in *Dispatches*.

## **2.2 Special significance of the chapter "Colleagues"**<sup>12</sup>

In the chapter "Colleagues" Michael Herr concerns himself with other journalists reporting from the Vietnam War at the same time like he did. In this context examines the way of journalism his colleagues and he use in their work, their articles, their photographs. Moreover, Herr tries to characterise them, to tell the reader about their lives, their time after being back from Vietnam and their experience with this terrible war.

In the beginning of "Colleagues" Herr describes his impressions of the whole 'journalistic' situation. All those correspondents and photographers who intended to report from Vietnam made Michael Herr feel a kind of lost and inexperienced. For him, war journalism was completely new, a kind of adventure. But some

correspondents already worked in their second or third war – they handled it like routine, and that is what Herr made uncertain<sup>13</sup>:

*“Admitting, for argument’s sake, that we were all a little crazy to have gone there in the first place, there were those whose madness it was not to know always which war they were actually in, fantasizing privately about other, older wars, Wars I and 2, air wars and desert wars and island wars, obscure colonial actions against countries whose names have since changed many times, punitive wars and holy wars and wars in places where the climate was so cool that you could wear a trench coat and look good; in other words, wars which sounded old and corny to those of us for whom the war in Vietnam was more than enough.”*

The story Herr tells us is for him like a film projected on a screen. He compares the effect of the Vietnam War for the rest of the world with the effects other wars had had before Vietnam started. After both, World War I and World War II, numerous movies were made – but with that war it was completely different. In accordance with Herr, the journalists had to make their own movies – produced by themselves and only in their mind<sup>14</sup>:

*“So we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine. [...] My movie, my friends, my colleagues.”*

The story about his friends and colleagues therefore was like a movie, like a film for him – a scenario Herr did not feel to be real, a situation that he – until those days in Vietnam – never had expected to experience himself. And that new situation was certainly one of his motives to use a new kind of journalism – the New Journalism.

With his mental movie about the colleagues he wanted to honour the other journalists who risk their lives in Vietnam.

One of the most significant and impressive of Herr's colleagues was a young photographer, Dana Stone, working for Associated Press (AP), an international press agency. Stone is a kind of joker within the group around Herr and the other correspondents<sup>15</sup>:

*“GIs who had forgotten his name would describe him for you as ‘that wiry little red-headed cat, crazy motherfucker, funny as a bastard’, and Stone was funny, making you pay for every laugh he gave you. Hard mischief was his speciality – a thumb stuck abruptly into your egg yolk at breakfast or your brandy at dinner, rocks lobbed on to the metal roof of your room at the press centre, flaming trails of lighter fluid rampaging across the floor towards you, a can of ham and limas substituted for peaches in syrup when you were practically dying of thirst – all Dana’s way of saying hello, doing you good by doing you in.”*

In spite of the ‘real’ nightmare all around them, the war, the death, the misery they had to face everyday they enjoyed being together, to have fun, to make jokes, just to talk to each other. But it was not always like that, of course. Usually, the journalists nearly were in that danger the soldiers found themselves in while exploring the surroundings or starting an attack or offensive. And that is why even the correspondents and photographers had to and really did worry about their own lives. They knew what the American soldiers had to feel like, what fears they had to withstand. These feelings therefore influenced the journalists’ work, the way they treated the soldiers and all other men who were involved in that Vietnam War was completely different from the normal journalistic treatment in ordinary life. In spite of this critical and quite dangerous situation, there were some journalists who worked as if there was no war, as if they ignore it and as if the soldiers were able to ignore it. Soldiers were asked questions concerning the world outside Vietnam, but in which

they could not really be interested in<sup>16</sup>:

*“And just-like-in-the-movies, there were a lot of correspondents who did their work, met their deadlines, filled the most preposterous assignments the best they could and withdrew, watching the war and all its hideous secrets, earning their cynicism the hard way and turning their self-contempt back out in laughter. If New York wanted to know how the troops felt about the assassination of Robert Kennedy, they’d go out and get it.”*

Herr does and did not let himself in for this kind of war journalism, especially concerning the Vietnam War. For him a particular situation, a special scenario calls for more than normal learned journalism to report in an understanding and successful way<sup>17</sup>:

*“ Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history.”*

But all in all – it does not matter if their journalism was adapted to the critical circumstances – the war welt together. Other correspondents became the best friends they ever had. And friends were the basis for a psychic stable condition of the single journalist. But in spite of all the friendships the correspondents could not stop thinking about the situation they were in: the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the journalists profited on the situation to be great friends with some other colleagues. By this, they all could better digest their fear, their worries, their terrible experiences. Talking to other correspondents about all that helped them to get along with the war, because they were the only people who were able to understand other correspondents’ feelings<sup>18</sup>:

*“But whether you hung out with them or with other correspondents, all you ever talked about anyway was the war, and they could come to seem like two very different wars after a while. Because who but another correspondent could talk the kind of mythical war that you wanted to hear described? [...] Who could you discuss politics with, except a colleague? (We all had roughly the same position on the war: We were in it, and that was a position.) Where else could you go for a real sense of the war’s past?”*

One of those correspondents in Vietnam also was Tim Page, a young photographer who joined the group of journalists later than Michael Herr himself. Page was a strange person with strange character traits. To Herr he was described as a “*crazy child*”<sup>19</sup>, whose young life had been varied. His occupation as photographer was not in the limelight if he had to earn money to get along. He worked as a cook, travelled through Europe and Asia and finally – after being married and divorced during one year – he came to Vietnam. Herr describes him as someone who was dependent on the group of correspondents when he had no money, no social environment to feel well. But if someone helped him he tried to pay back all that they had given to him<sup>20</sup>:

*“He was broke, so friends got him a place to sleep, gave him piastres, cigarettes, liquor, grass. Then he made a couple of thousand dollars on some fine pictures of the Offensive, and all of those things came back on us, twice over. That was the way the world was for Page; when he was broke you took care of him, when he was not he took care of you. It was above economics.”*

Instead of his trait to portrait himself and his life. He was really proud of all he had done and experienced in his life, but all that, however, never sounded arrogant or offensive to the other correspondents<sup>21</sup>:

*“He spoke of himself in the third person more than anyone I ever knew, but he was so totally ingenuous that it was never offensive.”*

It was like a pleasure for all of them if somebody – like Page – told interesting stories that were based on real life. So, they could be distracted from the war, from the misery around them.

But Page was also one of the hard fates that the Vietnam War brought out. After being hit by a shrapnel into his head, Page was said to be paralysed on his left side. But he did not think about giving up, he fought against it. He tried to let the war behind, to try to forget all of it. And his training, his therapy provided a fantastic physical success – physical, not psychological. His mind, his soul, they were broken – broken by the Vietnam War. He could not forget the time in Vietnam, the time with like-minded people that gave him so much, but also damaged him<sup>22</sup>:

*“He began talking more and more about the war, often coming to tears when he remembered how happy he and all of us had been there.”*

The war changed all of them, especially Tim Page. He did not seem to be able to live in this normal, ordinary world any more. Page was obviously strained by living a peaceful, daily life in the United States. Nevertheless, he tried to conceal his psychological condition, for instance by celebrating his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday with all those people *“who, he said, had bet him years ago in Saigon that he’d never make it past twenty-three”*<sup>23</sup>.

But that he indeed was seized by the war experience is proofed by Michael Herr by a situation in which Page was asked to write a book about Vietnam. The asked purpose *“to take the glamour out of war”*<sup>24</sup> confused Page so much that everybody can recognise how Vietnam War had made Page’s life in an ordinary world like the daily United States nearly impossible. It was just ridiculous what that British publisher asked him to do – a man who, like all the others who had not been to Vietnam, would never understand and reconstruct the feelings and experiences they had made there. It was just impossible for him to express his thoughts to

others<sup>25</sup>:

*“I mean, you know that, it just can’t be done!’ We both shrugged and laughed, and Page looked very thoughtful for a moment. ‘The very idea!’ he said. ‘Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!’”*

This quotation represents the end of the chapter “Colleagues” and obviously expresses not only the thoughts and feelings of Page, but also of all the other correspondents who reported from Vietnam War. Even Herr, who tried to digest all his experiences in his articles, seems to be at least a psychological victim of that terrible time.

### **3. Critics on Herr’s New Journalism**

There are various literary critics on Herr’s New Journalism style, especially in his book *Dispatches*. The aspects that are covered by these critics are widely spread, but all have one opinion in common: *Dispatches* is one of the greatest literary and journalistic works on Vietnam War. Not for nothing *Dispatches* was nominated for the Top 100 Works of Journalism, and finally ranked on 25. For the nomination several judges and experts commented on Herr’s book<sup>26</sup>:

*“[...]Writing so powerful it takes your breath away. The classic book of Vietnam journalism. (Ben Yagoda) The one book from the new journalism that will always stand up as factual observation using the style of fiction. (Jay Rosen) The single most compelling book about Vietnam ever written, in my opinion. (Lamar Graham) The most important and durable piece of journalism to emerge out of the Vietnam War. [...]”*

Most critics share the opinion that Herr’s work contains a special kind of ‘non-fiction fiction’. Herr describes the events with features novelists originally use.

Nevertheless, he does not allow any restrictions in his way of writing. For many experts Herr finds the ideal compromise between journalistic and novelistic style<sup>27</sup>:

*“Rather than merely reporting and thus exacerbating strange facts, or laboring over the construction of a credible fictional representation of an inherently incredible actuality, Herr is able to engage his subjects directly and innovatively. In Dispatches Herr avoids the need to restrict himself to the plausible world of the realistic novelist by working from a journalistic contract, [...]”*

In addition, the way Herr writes in his articles about Vietnam is said to be like mental image of the experiences he made at Vietnam. Herr does not tell us merely about all the superficial events, the appearance of the environment. Michael Herr rather writes his articles as a portrait of his various mental conditions during his time in Vietnam. Feelings and emotions is that what Herr intends to convey to the reader and to all those people who never made such an experience<sup>28</sup>:

*“By applying similar methods and strategies to his journalistic material, Herr is able to avoid the limitations of realistic fiction and conventional journalism. Instead of concentrating on surfaces, he constructs a self-reflexive fable – a highly stylized and emblematic exploration of the images that reside in his consciousness long after the actual events have passed.”*

In the minds of a lot of critics Herr revolutionised journalism with his way of writing those articles. Herr’s style offers a completely different kind of literature and journalism in one volume. Like he himself already said in *Dispatches* conventional, ordinary journalism did not suffice any longer to reveal all the misery Vietnam War provided. For this, Herr chose a style that was and is much more emotional and deeper than the usual style of journalistic work<sup>29</sup>:

*“Herr’s book offers an explanation of Vietnam in American history that goes deeper than conventional journalism or history to the national unconscious.”*

And exactly that style made *Dispatches* to a unique book whose content and language revealed Vietnam War better and more than any other work before. Herr managed to address the reader and the public by using new journalistic features, like the full dialogue recording. By this, the content of *Dispatches* became more lively and more realistic, so that the reader could better imagine and identify with Herr’s experience<sup>30</sup>:

*“Unlike the polemical reporting dominating the media during the war, Herr’s reports didn’t moralize much; they let the grunts do most of the talking, and it came out in a language as idiosyncratic and revealing as any specialists’ anywhere would.”*

Because of all these facts Herr has a quite fantastic reputation between all men of letters and journalists. He and his work in and around *Dispatches* are considered to be revolutionary for both literature and journalism at the same time – supposed to be one of the founders of New Journalism and the so called ‘non-fiction fiction’<sup>31</sup>:

*“The father of hipster combat journalism, the Orwell of the acid generation, he treated Vietnam as a wild-assed ride into the heart of darkness, borrowing techniques from the novel and film to enhance the spooky, aimless mood of war.”*

This last quotation shows the respect Michael Herr enjoys under his colleagues. With *Dispatches* got on everyone’s lips on the sector of literature and journalism. Vietnam War, by this, became a more frequently discussed topic in public and politics – also due to Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.

## **4. Conclusion**

After all I have stated in this essay, it is unambiguous that Michael Herr is and was a representative of the New Journalism. Especially in his articles for the *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone Magazine* and *New York Review* that later built up *Dispatches*, Herr meets all the requirements of New Journalism. As we all see, Michael Herr uses the features Tom Wolfe provides in his book *The New Journalism* and the aspects other experts considered to be hints for the new journalistic style, for instance the 'non-fiction fiction' with the features you usually find in novels.

Herr certainly is one of the most important and most influential authors and journalists respectively. With his realistic and authentic report about the actions of a freshmen group, about their feelings, about their dialogues, about their pride to fight for their country and at the same time the report about his own and the other correspondents' emotions and experiences, Michael Herr manages to reproduce the original pictures in the readers' mind. He constructs a world of war, a world of emotions – a world of terrible reality. The way Herr inserts the new journalistic features involves the reader like a real onlooker who watches the single scenes.

Herr and New Journalism – that is a quite perfect combination, for both literature and journalism. The effect this duo creates is in a way shocking, astonishing and informative at the same time. Parallel to the anti-war ideal of the Hippies, "Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll" Herr's work in *Dispatches* is compared to these three leading ideals. In an article from *Gadfly Magazine Online*, written by John Hellmann<sup>32</sup>, the author aptly formulates what is special about Herr's journalistic style:

*"Dispatches abandons conventional plotting for a structure based on the author's obsessive, relentlessly probing memory. Vignettes, cameos and brief episodes cohere through recurring images: violence as sex, war as drug, combat as rock and roll."*

Hellmann hits the nail on the head and at the same time he expresses what in in which amount Herr has done a great service for journalism and literature. Michael Herr is one of the icons of New Journalism.

## 5. Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Herr, Michael: *Dispatches*. London: Picador, 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Wolfe, Tom: *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 31/32
- <sup>4</sup> Herr, Michael: *Dispatches*. London: Picador, 1978. pp. 74-136
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 114
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 137-151
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 146
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143
- <sup>10</sup> Wolfe, Tom: *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973. p. 32
- <sup>11</sup> Herr, Michael: *Dispatches*. London: Picador, 1978. p. 75
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 152-199
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 152/153
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 175
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 175
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 190/191
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199
- <sup>26</sup> NYU: Department of Journalism – [http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/journal/Dept\\_news/News\\_stories/990301\\_nominees.htm](http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/journal/Dept_news/News_stories/990301_nominees.htm)
- <sup>27</sup> Hellmann, John: *Fables of Fact*. Urbana/Chicago/London: University of Illinois Press, 1981. p. 127
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128
- <sup>29</sup> Hellmann, John: *Who'll Play the Indians?* – <http://www.gadfly.org/1999-07/herr.asp>
- <sup>30</sup> Lopez, Ken: *The Literary Legacy of the Vietnam War*. – <http://www.lopezbooks.com/articles/vnfirsts.html>
- <sup>31</sup> Village Voice Literary Supplement: *War Junkies*. – <http://www.villagevoice.com/vls/167/woodward.shtml>
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**(11 ELQW 1372)**

## **7. Appendix: Internet-sources**

**VILLAGE VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT:** *War Junkies*. –

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<http://www.gadfly.org/1999-07/herr.asp>

**NYU – DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM:** *Nominees for The Top 100 Works of Journalism*. –

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