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The Ordinariness of Trauma: Reconstructing Intertextuality as an Aesthetics of Trauma

1 Vietnamization

In 2012, the Whitney Museum of American Art displayed an exhibition by Canadian artist Mischa Grey under the sober title *Grey – A Retrospective*. Pictures of the series *Vietnamization* from 1998 were among the pieces of art on display. The catalogue describes this creative phase of the artist with particular detail, and one sentence of the phraseology used there takes us to the core topic of this anthology: the discursive relation between image, trauma, and literature.[1] It reads as follows: "By drawing heavily on image material from the Vietnam War era and recirculating it, Grey has created an art series that symbolizes the loss of contact with the self."[2]

Vietnam played the lead role in the fight for medical recognition of traumatic suffering: as is commonly known, the American Psychiatric Association decided to react to the mass traumatization of the Vietnam veterans by adding *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* to their manual of mental disorders in 1980 (Mülder-Bach 2000: 8).[3] Considering that 18 years later, Grey compiled a series of images under the title *Vietnamization*, all of which depict "the loss of contact with the self," this phrasing presents a suitable description for the paradoxical situation of the traumatized person: the sufferer loses contact with his present life because the past – in the form of mental images within the traumatized memory – forces its way between the self and the present. The point of Grey's art is that she de-

1 For a good overview of the phenomenon of ekphrasis, see Boehm and Pfotenhauer 1995.
2 "Ved å trekke veksler på og resirkulere billedmateriale fra vietnamkrigæraen, skapte Grey en serie verk ment å symbolisere noe som var løst fra kontakt med seg selv" (Harstad 2015: 598). The quotations from the original Norwegian texts have been translated for this article.
3 "Als Reaktion auf die massenhafte Traumatisierung dieses gesellschaftlich zunehmend umstrittenen und militärisch verlorenen Krieges entschloss sich die American Psychiatric Association 1980, eine neue Kategorie in ihr Handbuch psychischer Erkrankungen aufzunehmen: die Kategorie ‚Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD)." ["In reaction to the mass traumatization in this publicly disputed and, from a military perspective, lost war, the American Psychiatric Association decided in 1980 to add a new category to their manual of mental disorders: the category *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD)."]

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picts the traumatic recurrence of mental images by reusing pictures from the media associated with the war in Vietnam from 20 to 30 years ago; or, as the *Retrospective* catalogue puts it, Grey produces the traumatic effect of losing contact with the self by letting *image* material from the Vietnam War era *re*-circulate in her own pictures. (How she does this exactly, will be described further below.)

The third aspect, literature, comes into play when we realize that Mischa Grey's pictures exist merely as verbal images: that they were part of a Retrospective in the Whitney Museum in New York is already – as is the existence of the artist – in itself a fiction, part of a brilliant novel titled *Max, Mischa & tetoffensiven* (*Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive*) from 2015. The author, Johan Harstad,[4] one of the most important and at the same time most entertaining representatives of contemporary Norwegian literature, has the protagonist of his novel, Max Hansen, take stock of his life over 1000 pages. In his statement of account, Max quotes his friend Mischa Grey's *Retrospective* catalogue over five long pages. This quote is thus a detailed ekphrasis of images of the trauma of Vietnam.

The fact that the pictures described there do not exist in the reader's reality, that we are not confronted with the *description* of an existing object but with the *evocation* of an imaginary object, does not take anything away from this. The same is true with regard to the very first example of this genre: Homer's ekphrasis of the images on the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* (Book 18) does not refer to a specific material object but to one that Homer imagined (Simon 1995: 123 – 141). The ekphrasis replaces the image. The important aspect of investigating this topic is rather the fact that Max Hansen, by recirculating an existing text (that of the *Retrospective* catalogue) in his own text, transfers the layering technique – which Mischa uses in *Vietnamization* – from visual arts to literature. That means that a technique from visual arts, used to artistically explore traumatic flashbacks and recurring dreams, is reproduced in the layering of texts. Thus, Harstad ties together two topics that initially do not seem to be connected to each other: on the one hand, mental suffering triggered by the experience of extreme violence, and, on the other hand, already established methods in artistic creation that are known in literary studies under the names of intertextuality, intermediation, or adaptation.

At the end of this article, I will draw two conclusions about the connection between trauma research and research into intertextuality by reconstructing the ekphrasis of Mischa Grey's *Vietnamization*. But before that, I will use the first half of the article to address another question, and its focus can also be derived

4 In literary studies, only a few works on Harstad have been published so far. Three examples are Jindřišková 2011, Mørk 2011, and Waage 2015.

from the ekphrastic passage in the novel: the *Retrospective* catalogue not only includes information about the techniques of trauma depiction, but also frames another objective of Mischa Grey's work, for the prints "reflected Hansen's fixation on Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* and the Vietnam conflict in general."[5] Thus, the topic is not really Vietnam veterans' trauma, but rather the main character's preoccupation with media images of that trauma. Using one character as an example, the novel negotiates the presence of trauma in our society: Harstad circles around the question of the attraction exerted by depictions of trauma. This question sounds improperly cynical: to what extent do we, as readers, museum-visitors, or filmgoers, benefit from other people's trauma? Why are we so interested in texts, films, and paintings about humans haunted by images of violence? Why do we, who do not suffer from trauma, expose ourselves, in the cinema or in our readings, to pictures and scenes that those suffering from trauma would very much like to be rid of? Why are non-traumatized people so fascinated by other people's trauma?

Although I will refer to two of Johan Harstad's texts in both parts of this article, I will not do so in the sense of a classical interpretation. Instead, I want to use literature's epistemological potential to discuss, *together with* Harstad's texts, the desire for trauma in our society and the link between trauma and intermediality, and trauma and intertextuality, respectively. Both issues are, of course, demanding and far too complex to be settled here, but I hope to illustrate one or two facets that can at least provide more structure in this complex area.

2 Regarding the pain of others: The authenticity of trauma

In order to investigate the attractiveness of trauma, I want to establish a dialogue between Harstad's play *Osv.* (*Etc.*) from 2010 and Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's study *L'empire du traumatisme*[6] from 2007. The play's plot develops over the years 1994 and 1995. The focus is on an American family suffering severe traumas. The daughter, Nola Zimmer, is traumatized because her husband and child were killed in the London Underground by a man also suffering from trau-

5 "reflekterte Hansens fiksering på Coppolas spillefilm *Apocalypse Now* og konflikten i Vietnam generelt" (Harstad 2015: 598).

6 I will quote from the English translation: Fassin, Didier, and Richard Rechtman (2009) *The Empire of Trauma. An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Translated by Rachel Gomme (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press).

ma. The shock of this event causes Nola's father, Joseph Zimmer, to recall crimes he committed as a soldier in the Vietnam War. The images of this past take possession of him so radically that he chooses to live as a tramp in a park, where he scrubs a Vietnam monument with soap and brush. And then there is the son, Alan Zimmer, who works as a war photographer, documenting war and genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Chechnya; in the epilogue set in November 2004 (i. e., almost 10 years later), he has a stroke, triggered by trauma, during a job in Fallujah, which, in turn, drives a suicide bomber to detonate his bomb.

The central problem, which is negotiated by the play on different levels, is that of testimony. Nola represents the victims, Joseph the perpetrators, and Alan the bystanders. All of them are traumatized. Time and time again, the other characters in the play ask them to recount the horrors they have experienced, convinced that trauma can be alleviated by testifying about it. But what was intended to be a therapeutic talking cure ends – in the case of the father, Joseph – in a criminal confession and with the question as to whether a sinner only needs to confess to be forgiven. The issue of war photography enters the discourse of testimony as well.[7] Unni Langås (2016: 150) writes of the drama: "How far can we go, what are we allowed to take pictures of, and when do we have to intervene?"[8] At what point does journalistic testimony become voyeurism? The question of why we non-traumatized people expose ourselves to images of trauma is directly addressed in *Osv.* using a war photographer as a character.

When tackling this question, one quickly notices that there are at least two possible paths to finding an answer. Langås took one of them in 2016 with her book *Traumets betydning i norsk samtidslitteratur* (*The Meaning of Trauma in Norwegian Contemporary Literature*), and her answer is so comprehensive that I am happy to just outline the basic ideas. With the help of many examples (and one of them is Harstad's play), Langås shows that trauma has been present in Norwegian fiction for the last 15 years. Behind her analyses lies the belief that literature has a social function. Narrative fiction constitutes an interface between collective and individual consciousness. This means that in the process of reading literature, the imagination of an individual is synchronized with the events in the world. It is this synchronization that enables us to talk about a common reality in the first place. And this also applies to the trauma: by depicting traumatizing events and traumatized characters, novels, plays, art exhibitions, and films com-

7 On photography and testimony, see Hirsch 2003: 19 – 40. On photography and trauma, see Baer 2002.

8 "Hvor går grensen for hva man kan ta bilde av, og når bør man gripe inn i en hendelse?"

municate the reality of the trauma to the individual imagination. Trauma literature takes the suffering of the traumatized seriously and interprets it as social and political reality.

Johan Harstad's play has the same function: the title of the drama *Osv.* is explained on the spine of the book. One reads: *Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda, Tsjetsjenia, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Irak osv.* (*Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.*) The title *Osv.*, hence, stands for the never-ending series of wars and military conflicts, which manifests itself in the changing locations that Alan Zimmer, the war photographer, travels to for his work. But, as the series of wars that were raging in the main plot of the play (Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya) stretches in the epilogue into the present-day of the reader, it renders the play highly authentic. Implicitly, the title says: I am telling a story about real-life military conflicts; this is about *your* reality, about *you!* Using Langås, it is possible to say about *Osv.* that trauma literature "points towards the present and the future, because the text delivers [...] critical perspectives and ideas on opportunities for action, that show a way out both at an individual and at a social level" (2016: 175).[9]

3 Re-authentication

The question of what "we" gain from other people's trauma can be looked at in a second, complementary way. This approach may be called literary-anthropological. In the words of Clifford Geertz, cultural artefacts are understood as acts of self-perception of a given culture. Therefore, my argument would be that trauma literature not only helps us to comprehend a reality that is not ours, but it also reflects the role that trauma plays in the framework of the signification of culture as a whole. Or, in the blunt words of Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, trauma can be seen "as a resource" (2009: 11).

We get a first hint at what this cynical thinking means when reading the afterword that Harstad appends to the printed version of *Osv.* Here he points towards a long series of non-fiction books and documents he consulted for his draft. The fact that he admits to the possibility of having made mistakes and that at one point or another, he might have made use of his artistic freedom, rather strengthens the authenticating pact he makes with the reader because the point of reference for his artistic freedom is simply the reality of the conflicts.

9 "er vendt mot nåtid og framtid fordi teksten leverer [...] kritiske perspektiver og ideer til reparerende handlemåter på individuelt og sosialt plan."

Accordingly, Harstad says that several scenes describe "what could have happened, or they are a fusion of several events, their point of departure being reality."[10] But then he suddenly breaks with the rhetoric of the documentary; he pinpoints the idea that "*Osv.* also includes quotes and edited material" from fictional films,[11] naming *The Shining*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Se7en*. This means, therefore, that the play draws its strength not only from its documentary material, but, to the same extent, also from images in the archive of popular culture that have become part of the cultural imagination.

This duplication becomes a topic in the text itself. In the park in which Joseph Zimmer spends his nights, there is a souvenir stall run by another Vietnam veteran. His name is Edward Bowman. In a conversation with Zimmer near the beginning of the play, Bowman describes how it feels to be haunted by the memories of Vietnam:

> And this is where Colorado comes in. The nature [...] is stunning [...]. Wide-open space. But when you close your eyes, you hear the music from *The Shining*, and then you know that no matter where you go, it will always be with you. Vietnam. You cannot escape. You remember it, crystal-clear, like photographs taken with expensive Hasselblad-cameras, everything you did. Everything you do not want to remember.[12]

The medium of the documentary, the photograph, becomes a metaphor for the memory. However, the surprising aspect here is that it is not only the direct experience (the jungle, the acts of war) that is recorded by the memory as the authentic Vietnam, but also *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick's film from 1980, in which Jack Nicholson takes on the role of a madman hunting Shelley Duvall in a hotel in Colorado. So even the veteran's imagination makes use of the archive of popular culture in order to zoom in on experiences stored in the memory. Or, to put it differently, the archive of popular culture becomes a medium for the re-authentication of experience.[13]

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10 "hva som kunne ha hendt, eller de er en sammenslåing av flere hendelser, med utgangspunkt i virkeligheten" (Harstad 2010: 507).

11 "*Osv.* inneholder også sitater og bearbeidelser fra" (Harstad 2010: 507).

12 "Og det er der Colorado kommer inn. Naturen, [...] overveldende [...]. Åpent landskap. Men hvis du lukker øynene, så hører du den musikken fra *The Shining*, og så vet du, at uansett hvor du drar, så følger det med deg. Vietnam. Du slipper ikke unna. Du husker det, krystallklart, som fotografier tatt med kostbare Hasselblad-apparater, alt du gjorde. Alt det du ikke vil huske" (Harstad 2010: 101).

13 Harstad uses the same point in *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive*. The veteran Owen experiences his first traumatic flashback triggered by the movie *Apocalypse Now*.

4 A variant of normality

This circumstance directs our attention to the fact that trauma is no longer merely a recognized clinical picture. Actually, in collective consciousness, trauma has acquired the status of a contextual framework. In their book *The Empire of Trauma. An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman identify this aspect. They start by pointing out the incredible trajectory that trauma as a concept[14] has travelled in the last 30 years. The fact that a person subject to extreme violence is at risk of suffering trauma and, thus, of needing psychological help, is a diagnosis that is not only discussed by experts, physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists. "Trauma is not confined to the psychiatric vocabulary, it is embedded in everyday usage. It has, in fact, created a new language of the event" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 6). The significant reversal from a medical term to an expression of everyday language coincided with the end of the Vietnam War, when *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) was recognized as a diagnosis. After recognition, the public opinion towards trauma changed fundamentally. Whilst during World War I, trauma had been defamed as a neurosis of quitters and weaklings (Horn 2000: 131–162), in 1980, PTSD was identified "as a normal response to an abnormal situation" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 96). According to Fassin and Rechtman, it is exactly this reinterpretation that has laid the foundation for the success of the concept of trauma outside of medical discourse, for the expression "that trauma was a variant of normality" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 97) allows us to detect that the conception of the human being has been reassembled in trauma:

> [T]he truth of trauma lies not in the psyche, the mind, or the brain but in the moral economy of contemporary societies. The fact that trauma has become so pervasive [...] is rather the product of a new relationship to time and memory, to mourning and obligations, to misfortune and the misfortunate. The psychological concept, trauma, has enabled us to give a name to this relationship. (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 276)

The proposition of a new "anthropology of the subject," which is concentrated in the practice of speaking about trauma, becomes especially comprehensible in the way that Fassin and Rechtman (2009: 279) reconstruct the situation of the

14 Of course, there are other scholars who investigate trauma as a concept with a cultural function. To name only two: Mülder-Bach (2000) demands that research should treat trauma in the same way as Susan Sontag deals with cancer and tuberculosis in her famous essays "Illness as Metaphor" and "AIDS and Its Metaphors," and E. Ann Kaplan (2005) coined the expression *Trauma Culture*, claiming that trauma literature helps to produce specific political contexts.

Vietnam veterans. The recognition of trauma "as a normal response to an abnormal situation" manages to solve a very specific dilemma in the context of the political and social situation in post-Vietnam America. The war had been lost, both in terms of military and propaganda. The returned soldiers who – according to the common war narrative – were supposed to be celebrated as heroes, were now suspected of being war criminals. In this situation, trauma offered the possibility for compromise because under the umbrella of trauma, even the perpetrators could be recognized as victims. The atrocities committed by the American soldiers could be interpreted as the causes or even the consequences of a traumatizing situation. In both cases, the soldiers who were labelled "traumatized" were entitled to compensation, medical care, and compassion. This provided the divided nation of America with the opportunity to deal with the abominable crimes that had been committed by their soldiers.

Suffering trauma displays even further the ordinariness of a person who had been, directly or indirectly, subject to extreme violence. And this ordinariness even applies to the traumatized perpetrator. As an anthropological concept, trauma offers a secular version of the Christian distinction between sinner and sin: the sin is to be condemned; the sinner, however, is to be recognized for his humanity. Yet, again in the words of Fassin and Rechtman, the "concept of trauma seems to indicate a general approval of the attractive idea that something of the human resists all forms of moral destruction" (2009: 97).

5 The anthropology of *Osv.*

Let us return to *Osv.*, or, rather, to the extended version of the title: *Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda, Tsjetsjenia, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Irak osv.* (*Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.*). According to the Norwegian article on the play on Wikipedia, the title expresses that "warfare will continue indefinitely."[15] However, against the background of Fassin and Rechtman's reconstruction of the Vietnam War, we need to formulate a more nuanced theory. First, the never-ending story of war does not begin with the Vietnam War. Why does Harstad start his title with Vietnam and not with World War II or even the Trojan War? Second, Vietnam as a battlefield differs significantly in one point from the other wars and massacres in the title: from a temporal point of view, the catastrophes of Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, and Iraq all occurred within a period of just a few years. They cover a pe-

15 "at krigføringen fortsetter i det uendelige."

riod of time stretching from the 1990s until today. The Vietnam War, on the other hand, ended back in 1975 (i. e., 17 years before the start of the Bosnian War). Vietnam's temporal distance to the continuous series of the other battlegrounds indicates that Harstad does not list Vietnam to simply name yet another war, but that it holds a special position or functions as a model. This special position would be justified by the role that Vietnam played in the social history of trauma as reconstructed by Fassin and Rechtman. Both indications point to the idea that the title does not merely aim to address a trans-historicity of war. Instead, *Osv.* is about a cultural model that originated in the Vietnam War.

This becomes particularly apparent when Benjamin, a man of 20 years of age, enters the plot in *Osv.* He is a nerd looking for Vietnam memorabilia at the souvenir stall. Bowman, who earlier described the film *The Shining* as a medium for re-authentication, insists in this passage on the absolute difference between experience and fiction. When Benjamin wants to buy a helmet that had been worn in Vietnam, Bowman mocks, "Do you really think that you become one of us by simply putting on a helmet and pretending to be at war?"[16] But then Benjamin gives a furious reply which takes up almost three pages in the printed version. I will only quote the most central sentences:

> Nobody wants to be like you, do you understand? [...] You are the biggest cliché in modern American history anyway. Nobody has ever disagreed that you went through hell in Vietnam, nobody has ever objected to that, we read all the books you wrote, we watched all the documentaries, all the films you made, oh my god, you lavished us with films and shouted that nobody understood what you went through. But, do you know what, we have seen it, my generation was brought up with it, we have watched them altogether, *The Boys in Company C*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Bullet in the Head*, *Heroes*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Birdy*, *Missing in Action* part 1, 2, 3 [...]. Vietnam is not a historical event anymore, it has become a cultural-historical event. [...] It has become its own myth, do you not see that? A national trauma, but you do not allow anyone else to touch it. It is one of this country's three biggest cultural export goods, the Vietnam War, Elvis and *Star Wars*! [...] We have made it a part of the American Dream.[17]

16 "Tror du virkelig at du blir som oss bare ved å ta på deg en hjelm og late som om du er i krig?" (Harstad 2010: 126).

17 "Det er ingen som vil bli som dere, forstår du det? [...] Dere er den største klisjeen i moderne amerikansk historie, jo. Det er ingen som er uenige med dere i at det var jævlig i Vietnam, ingen har protestert på det, vi har lest alle bøkene dere skrev, vi så alle dokumentarene, alle filmatiseringene deres, herregud, dere pøste ut filmer og ropte at ingen skjønte hva dere gikk gjennom. Men vet du hva, vi har sett det, min generasjon er oppfostret på det, vi så dem alle sammen, *The Boys in Company C*, *Hjortejegeren*, *Apokalypse nå*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Bullet in the Head*, *Krigens Helter*, *Født 4. juli*, *Birdy*, *Missing in Action* part 1, 2, 3 [...]. Vietnam er ikke lenger en historisk hendelse, det har blitt en kulturhistorisk hen-

Two aspects of this quote are particularly important. The first is the approach to trauma from a collective psychological point of view: Benjamin clearly denotes the consequences of transferring the traumas of individuals or of a certain group into a national trauma. On an individual level, trauma destroys the identity of a person and, thus, is a threat to his or her social ties. The play uses the three characters – Joseph, Nola, and Alan Zimmer – and their anti-social behaviors to exemplify this. Although the term denotes the destruction of individual identity and social proximity, "national trauma" serves to express collective identity. The Vietnam trauma does not weaken the identity of America; it is its stabilizer. To say it in Benjamin's cheeky words: "We have made it a part of the American Dream." Harstad expands on this collectivizing aspect. He leaves the national frame of the United States behind and broadens the reconciling function of the trauma concept globally by treating a series of other conflicts: Alan works in the conflict areas in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Chechnya (i. e., on different continents with different ethnic groups and very different conflicts). However, in the play, we do not learn anything about the specifics of the conflicts in the respective regions. Their individuality is erased and they are reduced to their traumatizing impact. In doing so, Harstad uses the socializing effect that the concept of trauma had for the American nation, but establishes its worldwide relevance. As a concept, trauma points towards an imaginary unity between the manifold phenomena (Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Somalia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Iraq). Thus, it performs a cultural task that was previously seen to by the great narratives of history: the universality of trauma seems to imply the idea of a world community. In a world of violence, trauma is the fate of everyone beyond all cultural, social, and religious differences.

The second, narratological aspect that I want to deduce from Benjamin's monologue becomes especially evident in his statement that the Vietnam veterans are "the biggest cliché in modern American history." As the trauma has now so often been the subject of films, novels, and documentaries, it has acquired the status of a narrative model in the collective consciousness: trauma provides the framework for a narrative in which a distinct series of events is brought into relation with each other, and we experience this sequence as meaningful. The logic of trauma is, so to say, the cultural hardware, with which the software of single trauma narratives can work. When reading *Osv.*, it immediately makes sense to us that a war veteran leaves his wife, lives as a tramp in a park, and wants to

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delse. [...] Det har blitt en egen mytologi, ser dere ikke det? Et nasjonalt traume, men dere tillater ingen andre å ta del i det. Det er en av de tre største kulturelle eksportartiklene fra dette landet. Vietnamkrigen, Elvis og *Star Wars!* [...] Vi har gjort det til en del av den amerikanske drømmen" (Harstad 2010: 126 – 128).

make amends for the past via a rather pointless activity. Harstad uses this self-evident connection for the exposition of the play. When his character Benjamin later betrays this technique, this part should be read as a meta-narrative: Benjamin draws the recipient's attention to the idea that we do not need any explanation of the logic behind the network of events. We are already familiar with it and have brought it with us to the theater. In terms of systems theory, the logic of trauma could be called a "re-enforcer of improbability," which means that the logic of trauma makes plots appear plausible, even if they seem to be absurd *per se*. The trauma narrative is established in such a way that authors like Harstad only have to hint at it and the reader will upload the entire context: Joseph Zimmer was in Vietnam and becomes a tramp – these few details are enough for the reader to know that Joseph suffers from trauma.

Now, it would be a mistake to think that Harstad wants to criticize the ordinariness of the logic of trauma when he uses the pejorative term "cliché," for it is not he who uses the term, but Benjamin, a flustered young man who feels he has to defend himself. The ordinariness in the context of trauma should, rather, be viewed as output in the cultural meaning-making process ("as a resource," as Fassin and Rechtman put it).[18] This output emerges only if someone (such as Benjamin) clearly differentiates individual suffering from the narrative model, because an important reassessment is made in the transformation of trauma from disorder to narrative model. If a person suffers from PTSD, it means, amongst other things, that the biographically significant sequence of past, present, and future is disrupted; the images from the past dominate the present in such a way that a normal way of life becomes impossible. Harstad exemplifies this with Nola, Alan, and Joseph Zimmer. However, as a narrative cliché that advances the plot, trauma has its own temporal rationality: we have become used to detecting the dysfunctional unity of trauma behind the pieces of a life in front of us. The term trauma, thus, denotes both individual suffering, which can be described as both the loss of meaning, and a culturally established pattern – a narrative context that makes immediate sense.

At the beginning of this article, I stated that testimony is an important concept of *Osv*. The drama narrates how different characters bear testimony to their respective trauma. But what does the drama itself testify to? To the reality of the trauma, or, rather, to the impact of a cultural pattern of interpretation? I believe

18 My expression "ordinariness of trauma" refers to something completely different than what Ban Wang in his article calls "the banality of trauma:" "The 'banality' of trauma draws attention away from the private psyche to the historical and enduring consequences of modern institutions and economic forces that destroy the entrenched, life-conditions of community on a daily basis" (2002: 146).

that *Osv.* shows both. It allows us to experience the reality of other people's suffering, but it also shows us that a new definition of humanity is concentrated in the trauma, offers the vision of global unity after the end of the great narratives of history, and functions as a narrative pattern that reveals some kind of logic behind an apparent senselessness. In short: *Osv.* shows the imaginary potential of trauma. It shows how trauma, as a code for a certain anthropological attitude, works in the cultural meaning-making process: trauma has become the signifier of our age.

6 Extended version

Benjamin only appears for a few minutes of the play, although the part he plays is of immense significance. Harstad's novel *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive* can be read as an expansion of his character over more than 1000 pages: Benjamin's fixation on the Vietnam industry is brought to a head by Max's obsession with a single film, namely Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Like the play, the novel makes a clear distinction between traumatic suffering and the cultural code: Max represents the cultural longing for trauma, and his Uncle Owen, a Vietnam veteran, stands for the mental suffering from trauma. Owen first re-experiences his trauma eight years after his return from the jungle – and the trigger is the movie *Apocalypse Now* (the entire flashback covers four pages; in the following quote, I have skipped over several ekphrastic passages in which individual sequences from *Apocalypse Now* have been retold):

> It turns dark [in the theater], it goes quiet and the movie begins, Owen watches the helicopters pass the sinister treeline to the sound of The Doors, and already here, after two short minutes, he feels a growing unease; it had not bothered him before [...]. His ability to sleep had been affected only slightly by Vietnam, he was almost surprised by that, but now, here in the movie theater, whilst the line of palms is exploding without warning and without a sound to Jim Morrison's singing voice, *This is the end, beautiful friend,* now he suddenly feels a wave of nausea sweep over him; his heart begins to pump and cold sweat runs down his neck. It is the treeline, this damned treeline, it reminds him too much of the view he once had, for heaven's sake, it's the same bloody view [...]; there are too many colours in the pictures and there is too much unpleasant music, his stomach is in knots and he gasps for air, feels how difficult it is to take in oxygen.[19]

19 "Det blir mørkt, det blir stille og filmen starter, Owen ser helikoptre passere foran den uhyggelig trelinjen til lyden av The Doors og allerede her, etter knappe to minutter, kjenner han ubehaget; det har ikke plaget ham før [...]. Han har mistet forsvinnende lite nattsøvn over Vietnam, det har nesten overrasket ham, men her, nå i kinosalen, mens trelinjen av palmetrær uten forvarsel og uten en lyd eksploderer til Jim Morrissons stemme, *This is the end, beautiful friend*, da

As for Bowman in *Osv.*, the movie is superimposed over what Owen has experienced; the fiction revives the repressed images of the woodland edge, places them into a new context and brings them back to mind. In the novel, Owen's suffering is important as a backdrop to Max's fixation on *Apocalypse Now*, because this is how it receives meaning: in the summer of 1990, at the age of 12, the first-person narrator, Max, has to emigrate with his family from Stavanger in Norway to the United States. On the face of it, Max's life seems to be a story of success: in 2012 (the "now" of the story), he is a young, and at the same time already renowned playwright and theater director living in Manhattan's Upper West Side. But his life has been shaped by an existential uneasiness and the search for its cause.

Max is deeply fascinated by the fact that his Uncle Owen is a Vietnam veteran. Shortly before learning of his parents' plans to emigrate, and years before meeting his American uncle for the first time, the 12-year-old boy secretly watches a copy of *Apocalypse Now* on their video player at home in Norway. The film is re-enacted in a game of cops and robbers, during which Max sustains a broken collarbone. "You are now a war veteran, we all are," one of his teammates whispers to him, while Max is lying in the hospital in a plaster cast.[20] "We fought hard and bravely and we won. We deserved to return back home."[21] This episode passes into the legend that Max later uses to deal with the loss of his primary socialization in Norway: he construes the move from Europe to the United States as trauma, which, even at the age of 35, allows him to interpret his existential rootlessness as analogous to Coppola's Vietnam soldiers. Like Benjamin in *Osv.*, Max longs for a narrative model of trauma that would allow him to hold onto the loss of his primary socialization as a wound. And when, at the end of the 1990s, his girlfriend Mischa Grey calls her series *Vietnamization*, she does not interpret his "interest in and/or longing for Vietnam"[22] as longing for traumatic suffering, but for a recognized cultural trauma pattern, which is attractive because it creates meaning in the emotional chaos.

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kjenner han med ett kvalmen velte inn over seg; hjertet begynner å slå og kaldsvetten renner nedover nakken hans. Det er denne trelinjen, denne helvetes trelinjen, den ligner for mye på den gamle utsikten hans, det er faen ta den samme jævla utsikten [...]; det er for mange farger på bildene og for ubehagelig musikk, det knyter seg i magen og han hiver desperat etter pusten, merker hvor vanskelig det er å få oksygen" (Harstad 2015: 408 – 411).

20 "Du er krigsveteran nå, vi er alle sammen det" (Harstad 2015: 95).

21 "Vi hadde kjempet hardt og tappert og vi hadde vunnet. Vi hadde gjort oss fortjent til å reise hjem" (Harstad 2015: 95).

22 "Vietnam-interesse og/eller lengsel" (Harstad 2015: 599).

7 Grey's aesthetics of trauma

When Max sees life through the filter of *Apocalypse Now*, he does exactly the same as Mischa Grey in her *Vietnamization* pictures. He recirculates image material that already exists and creates a distance between himself and the world around him. The ekphrasis of Grey's images in the *Retrospective* catalogue verbalizes this distance as the loss of contact with the self. Max describes his situation like this: "I was about to change from somebody that wished to return home, to somebody that wished he had the wish to go home."[23] The spatial distance to his former home, Norway, has turned into a mental distance to himself.

According to the *Retrospective* catalogue, Grey achieves the effect of traumatic distance in her images by letting existing image material recirculate. I have already mentioned this aspect in the introduction. Now I would like to reconstruct this technique with the help of two ekphrases from the catalogue: in one of her images, she blends "technical drawings of Bell UH-1B Iroquois helicopters (the first aircraft to be used in Vietnam)"[24] into a map of Norway. "The country's outline was confusingly identical with the outlines of the helicopters."[25] With that, she illustrates Max's "encapsulation" graphically: just as the helicopter, as the container of America, circles above the Vietnamese jungle, the mental image of Norway becomes a container for the lost primary socialization that mentally circles above his life in America in a traumatic way. More important for our general enquiry into the iconicity of trauma, however, is the fact that Grey's technique is in no way original, for she borrows the idea of recirculating images from Vietnam on a silk screen printing from Per Kleiva, the most important Norwegian pop-artist.[26] She finds inspiration in two of his pictures in particular: *Amerikanske sommerfugler (American Butterflies)* and *Blad frå imperialismens dagbok II (Page from the Diary of Imperialism II)*, both from 1971. In these prints, Kleiva also makes use of photographs of the Bell UH-1B Iroquois helicopters, which

23 "Jeg var i ferd med å forandre meg fra en som ønsket å dra hjem til en som ønsket at han ønsket å dra hjem" (Harstad 2015: 598).

24 "tekniske tegninger av Bell UH-1B Iroquois-helikoptre (den første modellen som ble satt inn i tjeneste i Vietnam)." (Harstad 2015: 599) The 'Huey,' as the Bell UH-1 Iroquois was nicknamed, had become an icon for the American War in Vietnam. The aircraft was given this status because Vietnam was "America's first television war" and the aircraft was used frequently by the American troops in Vietnam. See Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (2016: 28).

25 "[O]mrisset av nasjonen [var] til forveksling [...] likt omrisset av helikopterkroppen" (Harstad 2015: 599).

26 On Kleiva see Renberg et al. 1986 as well as Christian Norberg-Schulz et al. 1983: 182–188, 285–287.

were also nicknamed 'Huey': *Amerikanske sommerfugler* blends colorful butterfly wings with the grey rotor blades of helicopters, and in *Blad frå imperialismens dagbok II*, Kleiva copies a convoy of Hueys as a ghostly silhouette into the sky above a flowering meadow. The second print is particularly interesting because the meadow carries a visible European-Western connotation. The print does not depict the attack of a helicopter fleet on a Vietnamese village but the flashback to an attack that is blended into a (supposedly) Norwegian landscape; the real threat for the Vietnamese population is changed into a mental (but nothing less real) threat for the Norwegian television viewers that only know the helicopter images from the media. In the continuation of Kleiva's technique, Mischa Grey not only blends together two images (the technical drawing of a helicopter and the geographical map of Norway), but at the same time also blends in Kleiva's *Blad frå imperialismens dagbok II*, which again consists of two images that have been joined together. Her originality lies not in the technique itself, but in the intensification of the technique.

The *Retrospective* catalogue gives a very detailed description of a second painting from the *Vietnamization* series. The image material Grey reuses in the print *(Colby)* is based "on a still from Coppola's film."[27] Here, the character Colby appears only in one take, namely when the main character, Captain Willard, arrives at the camp of the monstrous Colonel Kurtz and his private army. He sees Colby standing with a rifle, surrounded by Asian women and children. Colby fulfils the narrative function of being a mirror for Willard, because he, just like Willard, received orders to liquidate Kurtz for the U.S. Army but, in contrast to Willard, he was drawn in by Kurtz's charisma and changed sides. So, Willard sees a copy of himself in Colby and, consequently, one of the possible future outcomes for himself. Colby's role in the film is limited to this one shot, thus becoming the subject of the gaze *per se*. Now Grey extracts this image from the film, and cuts and distorts it. The *Retrospective* catalogue describes *(Colby)* as follows:

> In Grey's reproduction of Colby, he appears out of context and an audience that has no deeper knowledge of Coppola's film will hardly recognize the motif. As the original photograph has been edited this way, Colby is standing in the center of the artwork, reminiscent of Christ (and with Kurtz outside the frame, as a possible God), surrounded by South Asian women and children, with a few soldiers standing in the background. But, as if he were a violent incarnation of Christ, Colby looks miserable, and misplaced. He does not belong here and he knows it. So if we add what we know from the film that the picture

27 "på et stillbilde fra Coppolas film" (Harstad 2015: 601).

> was taken from: He cannot leave. It is too late now. He may be staged as a deity, but he is oh so human.[28]

The image's effect is again produced by the multilayered overlay. Of course, there is the still from Coppola's film. But *Apocalypse Now*, as we know, is itself already an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899),[29] filtered again by another adaptation. This time, it is the radio drama produced in 1938 by Orson Welles, which had a considerable influence on Coppola.[30] But even the reference to incarnation in the quote above opens the gateway to a tradition of images: the God presenting himself in Grey's image is marked as "oh so human". With this, Harstad refers to the motif of the *Ecce Homo*, which must be translated as "Behold the man". In the Gospel of John, the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate presents the scourged Jesus, wearing a scarlet coat and the crown of thorns, to the people of Jerusalem, and with his dictum *ecce homo*, he emphasizes his humanity, which, in this situation, means his vulnerability. Since the Middle Ages, the motif of a scourged and humiliated Christ had become a popular motif for devotional pictures in which Jesus (like Colby in Grey's image) is extracted from the whole scene in Pilate's palace. This highlights the aspect that in the biblical scene, Christ (again like Colby) has become the subject of the gaze altogether: "He may be staged as a deity, but he is oh so human." Additionally, in the Gospel of John, Pilate wanted to come to Jesus's defense against the accusation that he had committed blasphemy, by pointing out his humanity; Jesus was accused of making himself God, which in Judaism was a contemptible crime. And this element is repeated in the character of Colby. Although he committed the most horrific crimes in Kurtz's camp, he still deserves pity for his trauma. The trauma of the Vietnam soldiers "showed they still shared in the humanity that their cruelty would seem to have destroyed" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 94).

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28 "I Greys gjengivelse av Colby opptrer han utenfor kontekst, og publikum uten nær kjennskap til Coppolas film vil neppe gjenkjenne motivet. Fordi kildefotografiet er beskåret slik det er, fremstår Colby plassert i sentrum av maleriet, som en kristuslignende persona (og med Kurtz selv utenfor billedrammen, som en mulig Gud), omgitt av sørøstasiatiske kvinner og barn, med noen få soldater stående i bakgrunnen. Men som en voldelig inkarnasjon av Kristus ser Colby mistrøstig ut, og ute av sitt rette element. Han hører ikke hjemme her og han vet det. Så, hvis vi legger til det vi vet fra filmen motivet er hentet fra: Han kan ikke dra. Det er for sent nå. Han blir kan hende sett opp til som en guddom, men han er akk så menneskelig" (Harstad 2015: 602–603).

29 On Coppola's adaptation of Conrad, see Poppe 2007: 243–304.

30 For more details on *Apocalypse Now* as a mirror cabinet of the texts, see Elsaesser and Wedel 2016: 19–24.

If Fassin and Rechtman are right in stating that trauma is a "major signifier of our age" (2009: xi) and is seen "as the locus of an essential truth about humanity" (2009: 95), then the title *Vietnamization* has to be read as a modern variant of the term *incarnation:* the incarnation of man, the recognition of man's vulnerability as his essential human quality. The fact that this is shown using the character Colby from *Apocalypse Now* makes it clear that the novel *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive* comes to the same realization as *The Empire of Trauma:* that the anthropology of trauma achieved its breakthrough in the context of the Vietnam War.

8 Two conclusions on intermediality, intertextuality, and trauma

With regard to the play *Osv.*, I have tried to differentiate between trauma as a mental disorder and trauma as an anthropological code in the study of trauma literature, and with regard to the novel *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive*, I have reconstructed intermedial techniques of the depiction of trauma. Let me make one outcome very clear: it would be wrong to read trauma fiction (in pictures, films, and novels) solely as depictions of trauma. It is not trauma on the one hand and its representation on the other. In fact, trauma has been integrated into processes of mediatization right from the very beginning. This applies to suffering, but it applies even more to the cultural pattern of trauma. I therefore endeavor to present two conclusions about the mediality of trauma that could affect the handling of literature in trauma studies.

Intermediality: a traumatized person does not suffer due to having to experience the same traumatizing event over and over again. Instead, the trauma itself is a mediatization of said event (i. e., the event has already been translated into images or mental scenes). Therefore, it is not the actual event repeating itself in trauma, but the images and scenes connected to it. The literary technique of ekphrasis functions as a transformation of a (mental, artistic, documentary) picture into a text (i. e., into a different medium). Ekphrasis therefore resembles trauma in one important aspect: as a change of medium. The dense presence of ekphrastic passages in trauma literature that the essays in this volume bear witness to shows that literature makes extensive use of this analogy. Therefore, ekphrastic competence is an essential tool for research in literary trauma studies. As the examples from *Osv.* and *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive* show, literature investigates the intermedial logics of trauma by reshaping them in other forms of intermediality, namely in ekphrastic passages.

Intertextuality: the phenomenon of literary recurrence has often been addressed under the heading of intertextuality. Literary studies emphasize that the intertextual element changes its meaning according to its new context, even if the element itself is integrated without any morphological alteration. Intertextuality is therefore a character of semantic change. The same can be said about trauma. Although trauma can be described as an uncontrollable recurrence of the same images, the context in which these images occur is subject to change. This is true, on the one hand, for a specific person's individual suffering: traumatic images recur, influencing an increasing number of life spheres (i.e., they flow from one semantic field into another), thereby changing their meaning. But the same also applies to collective traumas. They refer to one and the same event as well; however, the social situation they are staged in is constantly changing. Therefore, although the collective images seem to remain unaltered, they may play different political roles depending on the social situation. An intertextual examination of trauma literature could hence bring attention to the – so far scarcely considered – semantic change of seemingly unalterable traumatic images. The specific relation between identity and variance of traumatic images can be analyzed as an intertextual phenomenon in trauma literature: as travelling images throughout a number of texts. This is reflected by the novel *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive* when it presents Grey's picture (*Colby*) as a layering of intertexts: Conrad's novel, Welles's radio drama, Coppola's film, the *ecce homo* tradition. At the end of this intertextual crisscrossing, the semantics of trauma rubs off on the medieval *ecce homo* motif and the semantics of incarnation rubs off on today's concept of trauma.

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