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WOMEN WAR CORRESPONDENTS: DOES GENDER MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON THE FRONT LINE?

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ABSTRACT:

Although there have been women reporters on the front lines since the First World War and their number has increased more and more in subsequent conflicts in the twentieth century, it was only during the first Gulf War that the phenomenon – fostered by the escalating feminisation of newsroom personnel in many countries – gained momentum. The visibility of women war correspondents on national and international television channels is now taken for granted; and women journalists from newspapers have stood by the side of, or replaced, their male colleagues when covering the conflicts. This paper deals with the controversial question of whether or not women journalists covering the news from the front lines 'speak in a different voice' from their male counterparts. War understandably offers a special opportunity for exploring such a question, since it is particularly in war that the agenda and the rules of the game of still mostly male-dominated journalism come to the fore. This paper, which is based on research still in progress, aims at investigating whether women journalists (or at least some of them, in specific circumstances), once they have been admitted to the male preserve of foreign correspondents and furthermore to the most masculine of action systems such as war, are willing and able to create their own gender-based agenda and express their own point of view.

KEY WORDS:

women, war correspondents, witnessing, journalism of attachment, mediation of suffering,



1. An issue that is worthy of investigation

Gender, armed conflicts, information from the press. If as scholars and researchers we concern ourselves with women war correspondents, the ones who are sent to the front line and to military flashpoints, we find ourselves reflecting upon and investigating the dense and complicated relationships between some of the most crucial and constitutive elements of the world we live in: to be precise, those elements that are conjured up by each linguistic segment of the phrase 'women war correspondents' and brought directly to our attention.

There can be no doubt that we are faced with an important matter to be analysed, which is made particularly interesting by the element of dissonance inherent in a sort of 'triad' where by virtue of convention and an ideological and cultural conviction rooted in a long historical tradition, two of the three elements – women and war – are regarded as difficult to reconcile, if not quite (or no longer) diametrically opposed. Of course, the very fact that a sizeable number of journalists sent to the front line these days are women – without forgetting their constant, if exiguous, presence since newspapers were invented – tones down this dissonance and reduces the perceived gap between women and war.

Dealing with a three-fold relationship that comes into being within and through the culture and practices of news reporting opens up an entire field of questions to scrutiny and reflection. These questions relate to information itself, which has become an integral part of the whole war experience (Tumber & Webster, 2006). One particular dilemma relates to whether the relative anomaly of the feminine presence in the theatres of war may perhaps (but not necessarily) give rise to perceptible and significant differences in the news coverage and reconstruction of the events, the processes and the effects of the war.

Obviously I am alluding to the vexed question of gender difference in a war report and in journalism in general, which I intend to reintroduce in the context of an approach which is – I hope – neither naïvely optimistic nor theoretical in the abstract, nor indeed too programmatically sceptical. Here I will confine myself to pointing out how, in my opinion, it is possible to discern in this three-fold relationship a potential for change which, if realised in certain given conditions, deserves to be examined – as a working hypothesis, if nothing else. This is not in any way a matter of identifying gender as the unique determinant of change (an idea that is dangerously close to spilling over into sexism and has therefore now fallen into disuse) but rather of understanding whether gender, interacting with other factors and in specific circumstances, serves to generate a change that is significant, widespread and lasting.

Women journalists have covered wars and conflicts since the nineteenth century, as is well documented in numerous biographies and historical accounts (Edwards, 1988; Elwood-Akers, 1988; Mills, 1990; Sebba, 1994; Caldwell Sorel, 2000; Colman, 2002; Bartimus et al., 2004, to quote but a few). These span the whole of the long period up to the beginning of the 1990s, when women journalists at the front 'were hardly commonplace' (Sebba, 1994, p.1) – although there were already nearly 500 of them from all parts of the world in the Vietnam war (Haller, 2006).



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The authors, male or female, of these works – guided primarily by a laudable intention to ‘celebrate’ the progress of women in journalism and to protect the most noteworthy women war reporters from being underrated or forgotten – hardly ever shrink from confronting, in varying degrees of depth and focus, the unavoidable question of the ‘woman’s point of view’. But however acute, well-argued and nuanced the considerations and analyses in these broadly historical works may be (and indeed sometimes are), one has to recognise that their capacity to throw light on the question does not extend to our present time.

Wars, women, journalism and the work of war correspondents have gone through considerable changes in the course of the last two decades. Such changes challenge us to confront the old dilemmas in ways that are more appropriate to changed circumstances, bringing into play analytical and interpretative tools that draw inspiration from a wider horizon of theoretical discourse and thematic references. To limit myself to just one example, I am thinking of the recent flowering of studies on the mediation of suffering, on ‘global compassion’ (Boltanski, 1993; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001; Cohen, 2001; Sontag, 2003; Hoijer, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006). These studies are a resource to be deployed experimentally, to try to view ‘the interest in the human side of war reporting’ (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 225), presumed to be characteristic of reports from women, from new perspectives.

‘Where there is war, there is Amanpour’. This title of an article in the New York Times on 9 October 1994, dedicated to Christiane Amanpour, CNN’s chief international correspondent, has become a ‘household saying’ that could easily and plausibly be paraphrased in wider and more general terms: where there is war, there are women reporters. The unprecedented number of ‘women journalists [who] are flocking to the world’s war zones’ (Ricchiardi, 1994) is a phenomenon that has emerged and increased during the past twenty years – in part, but not entirely, as a spin-off from the increased ‘feminisation’ of editorial boards.

In the field of media studies and, as is obvious, above all in the works that adopt a gender standpoint, such a major new fact has not passed unnoticed. Although they rarely constitute the core of research in the strict sense (Pedelty, 1997) or the object of widespread and dedicated consideration (Sebba, 1994; Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, 2004; Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster, 2005), the recent rise of the female war reporter and the implications at various levels of the current considerable female presence on front lines are topics that crop up, to a greater or lesser extent, in a vast range of texts and discussions: for example, in the pages of books that discuss the impact of the ‘information war’ on journalistic practice (Tumber and Webster, 2006); or examine in detail the work of war correspondents (McLaughlin, 2002); or problematize the feminisation of contemporary journalism (Van Zoonen, 1998; Buonanno, 2005).

Nevertheless there remains plenty of scope for studies with more breadth and depth. Studies of this kind may have been obstructed by, among other things, the dismissive attitude sometimes in evidence towards feminine achievement that is suspected of serving the media’s interests more than the cause of equal opportunity. Women assigned to conflict zones, certain observers emphasise, are in particular those working for television. This is no coincidence: the networks use them in accordance with the commercial logic of market-driven journalism, which sees an advantage in exploiting the attraction of a feminine figure, ‘a (preferably pretty) woman in a flak



jacket', against the background of an unfolding tragedy. (Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, 2004, p. 211; see also Sebba, 1994; Gallagher, 1995; Van Zoonen, 1998). The visibility of the women reporters may well serve as a dramatic and emotional intensifier in relation to the news, but it is also 'a pleasant distraction from the horror of the events themselves' (Van Zoonen, 1998, p.44).

It may be true, and it is not without importance. But in this narrow fashion only one aspect of the phenomenon is emphasised, and not even the most intriguing one. I am therefore compelled to re-confirm the importance of an issue that up till now, in my view, has not received sufficient attention: it requires our consideration as scholars and researchers and offers a stimulating mixture of challenges and promises concerning mostly unexplored areas of knowledge about gender and journalism.

2. A situated choice

Since the processes of scientific selection and prioritisation – just as in journalism – are often structured in the intersection between objective (or reputedly so) relevance criteria and preference systems linked to the 'situated location' of the individuals, I think I must at this point make explicit certain personal circumstances which, without being conclusive, serve to reinforce my choice to study the theme of women war correspondents. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, these circumstances steer my methodological options in a direction which is unusual in research into journalism.

I am referring to the fact of my being Italian, and therefore concerned with women and journalism from the perspective of a country that started off by providing the scenario and the event of the first women's war report in journalistic history. This case, understandably little known outside the restricted circles of readers and writers of international stories about women or the press, coincided with the siege of Rome by the French army in the middle of the nineteenth century. Margaret Fuller, Europe correspondent at that time for the *New York Tribune* (Mills, 1990; Pedelty, 1997; Chambers, Steiner, Fleming 2004), was the witness and the chronicler, sending out of Italy the first war reportage by a woman.

It should be understood that were it not for this long-past episode of eminently symbolic valour, there would be no special incentive in the Italian context to focus on the subject of women sent to the front line. On the other hand numerous incentives arise from the tragic instances of our reporters being killed and abducted in various theatres of war (Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq) and above all from the towering figure of the Italian pioneer of war correspondents and one of the most famous and distinguished journalists in the world: the late Oriana Fallaci. She was an almost mythical personality whose amazing journalistic talent made her, in the words of Christiane Amanpour, an 'all-time hero' for subsequent generations of women journalists. Oriana Fallaci was a top-ranking public figure and remains an unforgettable protagonist of national and international journalism. The image of the female war correspondent, thanks to her, has entered the annals of Italian journalism.



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Oriana Fallaci has left behind memories of her experiences as a war reporter in her book *Niente e così sia* ('Nothing, and so be it'), written after her first year in Vietnam as reporter for a weekly news magazine (Fallaci, 1969). This is not surprising. For the whole of her life Fallaci was a writer – or rather, in her own definition, 'a writer lent to journalism': a prolific and very popular author of fiction and non-fiction. In truth this is not surprising in the Italian context in particular, where publishing books – from essays on current affairs to historical recollections, collections of articles and news reports and novels – is a very widespread practice among journalists, especially the most well-known ones who cash in on their popularity whether acquired through the media, television or press. The annual best-seller list regularly includes some titles written by journalists, not infrequently ones in elevated positions. I must confess that I have long regarded this practice with an attitude that is imbued with a sort of double snobbishness: towards the journalists, who seem to me thus to confirm that narcissistic self-indulgence of which they are often accused; and towards the readers themselves, who can be suspected – in a country where people read little, at any rate in relation to the amount that is published – of being lured by the crafty appeal of media personalities.

On this I have begun to change my mind, observing how new tendencies have emerged since the beginning of the 1990s in this sector of national book-publishing concerning both authors and the content of their publications. In general, there have been more books written by war reporters, who are again recounting their professional and human experience on the scene of conflicts. Within this sub-sector in particular, a substantial and entirely feminine space has come into being, occupied by the memoirs of the growing number of women journalists who have been assigned to war coverage by the television networks and newspapers.

More conflicts on the global scene, more women among war reporters, more books written by women. This literary genre of memoirs and autobiography, which I have put to the test and read out of curiosity, offered and continues to offer (since the trend still persists) plenty of reasons for taking an interest in it.

It would not have taken me long to find out that I was not faced with a mere Italian eccentricity, given that the increasing number of memoirs and biographies by war correspondents, male and female, came to constitute a phenomenon that could be observed on the international level. As Howard Tumber stated recently: 'Of all the journalists involved in the many categories and specialisms of journalism, foreign correspondents seem to produce the most books about themselves and their work. It may be that publishers believe these are the most interesting "tales" of the profession and will therefore sell well in the market. It may also be that journalists who cover war and conflict have the most stories to relate about their work and life and (without going into psychological profiles) feel the need to relate these to a wider public. Perhaps they provide poignant and interesting reflections.' (Tumber, 2006, p. 440).

Why the foreign correspondents of every country, men and women, should feel (or indulge) more than other people the urge to write autobiographies and memoirs is one of the first questions that came into my mind as I became aware of the flourishing production of books by war reporters. But the plausible hypothesis that it is necessary to examine the books themselves in order to track down an answer, or a set of answers, would not have been sufficient *per se* for me to



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identify in this textual corpus an appropriate field in which to carry out my research on women at the front line. In that sense, what was more conclusive was the eloquent evidence yielded by the unique opportunity of access, through a large but manageable and available collection of texts (more than 30, but others could still be added to the list), narrations and recollections of the world's major conflicts in the past two decades: narrations and recollections produced by women journalists from different countries, who on behalf of various media have covered those conflicts direct from the front line.

I will confine myself to a few quotations to give just an idea of the corpus I am referring to, which furthermore includes, at least in part, works by journalists who have acquired international notoriety. I note here Linda Melvern's book, *Conspiracy to Murder* (2004) on the genocide in Rwanda; the first Gulf War, recalled by Molly Moore in *A Woman at War* (1993); the conflict in Chechnya, written about by many from Anna Politkovskaia, *Tchéchénie, le déshonneur russe*, (2003), to Anne Nivat, *Chienne de guerre* (2001) and Asne Seierstad, *Il bambino dal cuore di lupo* (2008); the Balkan war, narrated by Janine di Giovanni in *Madness Visible* (2003).; and also Kate Adie's autobiography, *The Kindness of Strangers* (2002), which takes us through the long professional experience of a reporter on all fronts of war and international crisis from Northern Ireland to Sarajevo to Tiananmen Square. Finally the books written by Italian journalists who have been reporters in Somalia: Gabriella Simoni, *Inferno Somalia* (1993); in Afghanistan: Tiziana Ferrario, *Il vento di Kabul* (2006); and in Iraq: Monica Maggioni, *Dentro la guerra* (2005). There have been many others; at the time of writing I have assembled nearly 30 of them.

I have made no secret of the fact that my methodological option has a somewhat fortuitous origin, since it was worked out initially by observing the flood of newly-published works on the shelves of Italian bookshops. Furthermore, I am aware that the choice of a corpus of book analysis may create the impression of weak or merely collateral relevance, whereas in research relating to journalists it would seem much more sensible and fruitful to approach the subjects directly or to examine their main written and spoken output; that is to say, in the case of war correspondents, their day-to-day coverage of events in war. Without any doubt, information on wars and public knowledge of the realities of war and conflict are essentially transmitted through the reports which correspondents send from the front and which press, radio and above all television disseminate among the reading and viewing public. What sort of 'definers of reality as regards war' (Tumber and Webster, 2006, p.171) women may be, and whether they differ in this respect from their male counterparts, are questions that an analysis of coverage in the print and broadcasting media could perhaps help to answer.

Assembling and investigating such documentation – taking a sample of journalistic coverage of present-day conflicts in the international media – is clearly beyond the capacity of individual non-subsidised research. However it is not only the convenient accessibility of books, together with the advantage they offer of covering a wide horizon of time and space and including women journalists of various nationalities among the writers, that favours my choice of a corpus of book analysis.

For one thing, such a choice is not so idiosyncratic or eccentric to be without precedent, although – as I have acknowledged above – it is undeniably unusual. Linda Steiner's research into



'gendered' working conditions in English and American newsrooms in the first half of the twentieth century is entirely based on 'autobiographical descriptions from several women' (Steiner, 1998, p. 145). And 'a wide range of memoirs and autobiographies' and interviews were taken into consideration in the works of Howard Tumber, an author whom I have already had occasion to cite and whose assessment of the autobiographical writings and memoirs of war correspondents (in my case, women) as 'frequently illuminating and thoughtful' I fully share (Tumber, 2006, p. 440).

It is precisely this dimension of thoughtfulness, permitted by working conditions that are not subjected to the same constraints and time pressures (and more besides) of reportage from the front, that confers depth and interest to war stories in the pages of books. Furthermore, what these tales often highlight are features— physical conditions, relationships, cultural aspects – of the living conditions and work at the front that generally have no place in written or spoken journalistic war coverage aimed at the wide media audience; yet these aspects can prove to be valuable in reconstructing the context of the subject's experience.

Far from being a second-best option, therefore, the autobiographies and memoirs of women war correspondents are a documentary source that is appropriate, even preferable, for the aims of my current research.

3. A new environment

It should be well understood that the research I am referring to is still at the planning stage; indeed it should be entirely clear that I am at that exciting preliminary phase of 'primitive accumulation' that is familiar to nearly all researchers: when the physical spaces of one's working environment (bookshelves and desks) are invaded by a compulsive collection of bibliographical material and a similar invasion hits the computer memory where one installs the findings from repeated internet searches, while the spaces in one's mind are crowded with impressions, questions and hypotheses, aroused by studies, reading, observation and sharing one's ideas with others. From this point onwards, the initial plan takes on a definite shape and the research branches off on its sequential course.

It is customary for research papers presented at academic meetings to refer to projects that are at least at an advanced stage, even if they are incomplete. That way it is possible for participants to become aware, if only in a partial and provisional fashion, of what – at the discussion level, and for the benefits conferred by the knowledge – is the most important and interesting thing in a research project: the results.

But that is not the case with this presentation of mine. I have previously introduced the topic to be investigated and I have justified my choice of an empirical corpus; but in no way would I be able to expound the results of an investigation that has barely begun and which still needs a clearer definition and a refinement of its hypotheses, as well as a setting-up of analytical tools. Therefore, however irregular or alien to academic conference practice it may seem, I shall dedicate the last



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part of my presentation not to the final conclusion of my research into women war reporters but to my starting point: that is to say, I shall try to unravel the thread of reasoning that, in my project, sustains the hypothesis – susceptible of being either validated or proved false – that there is possibly a feminine ‘difference’ in present-day reporting on wars and conflicts. I shall say shortly what sort of specific meaning I ascribe to such a difference, while I shall make explicit right now my awareness that the thread of argument is in some respects more fine-drawn or more complex than one would wish.

I shall start with what is well known to all those who are concerned with ‘women and news’. The question of whether gender does or does not make a difference in the selection and treatment of news items has been asked, discussed and investigated an infinite number of times in scholarly and professional literature, over the years and above all in the past two decades, without ever reaching conclusions that were not infused with a generous measure of doubt or circumspect vagueness – ‘some women write or broadcast different elements in stories than some men would write or broadcast about the same events’ (Mills, 1997, p. 42) – even if they did not plainly verge in the direction of denial or refutation. I know that by taking this line I have made a very rough simplification, but to summarise the ‘state of the art’ I would say that in scholarly circles a mindset prevails that emphasises the fragility, the equivocal and contradictory character or the pure and simple absence of serious empirical evidence that can support the hypothesis of a feminine difference in journalism. Authoritative women scholars assert in this connection that ‘[if] data tell something about differences between women and men in journalism, they actually tell something about self-perceptions and self-images’ (Van Zoonen, 1998, p. 37).

In professional circles the range of opinions perhaps seems more fractured and ambivalent, more inclined to support a ‘presumption’ of a difference, if nothing else (see for example Ross, 2001). But here also it is not possible to generalise; as Michael Schudson opportunely reminds us, ‘prominent women in journalism have long denied that gender could, let alone should, influence news judgement’ (Schudson, 2003, p. 111). The idea that women could practise journalism in a different way from their male colleagues seemed to many a real affront to their professionalism. This perception was in all likelihood sharpened by the awareness that to endorse, if not to claim, a vision and a practice of journalism that was ‘gendered’ would in effect mean legitimising the minority status and marginalisation to which women were long exposed in the newsrooms, precisely because they were deemed to be suited and called to practise only an undervalued and unimportant ‘female journalism’.

‘This is no longer true’, concludes Schudson, referring in particular to the subversion of the hierarchies of newsworthiness that has been going on for years: those subjects that at one time were relegated to lesser and peripheral journalism – ‘women’s topics’, soft news, so-called ‘human interest’ stories – have become ‘legitimate general-interest news stories’ (Schudson, 2003, p. 112).

On the other hand the relationship between the presence, by now considerable, of women in the newsroom and the transformations that have taken place in agendas and journalistic styles – in other and more stereotypical words, the relationship between the critical mass of women and the change in news reporting – is not so peaceable and predictable as might appear from my



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previous statements. It frequently gives rise to discussions and problems concerning the supposed 'feminisation of the news' (among others, see Buonanno, 2005; Carter et al., 1998; Chambers et al., 2004; De Bruin and Ross, 2004). I confine myself to pointing this out, without going on to give examples and quotations, simply to give more weight to what I am about to reassert: the question whether women make a difference and bring about change in journalism has hitherto generated responses that are inconclusive and contradictory, if indeed not sceptical or negative – to the extent that anyone who persists in investigating this contentious terrain is seriously discouraged.

Nevertheless such persistence is here justified by the fact that the question is reformulated within, or with reference to, a specific context that is in almost all respects out of the ordinary: the front line of war and zones of crisis and conflict. There is no need to be an adherent of a radical contextualism to agree that since the state of our knowledge referred to above – inconsistent or ambiguous results, unconvincing empirical evidence, in short lack of certainty – is the fruit of study and research that is carried out within the spatial, organisational and relational confines of newsrooms, it does not necessarily lend itself to generalisation or extrapolation to other settings, still less to settings as different and specialised as theatres of war.

Other scholars, to whom I must acknowledge a debt in writing this paper, have pointed out before me that it is opportune to pay attention to the way in which the war context can represent anew the positions and attitudes of women journalists. Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster, for example, in their research into the journalist practices of war correspondents, speak of a 'new environment' (2005, p. 375) coming into being on the front line, which to some extent is more favourable to women. Mark Pedelty, author of pioneering ethnographical research on reporters on the war in El Salvador (1995, 1997), states his view still more directly. He traces back to the context of war those elements of courage and motivation that allow women to be identified as a group that is different from their male colleagues: 'War may have drawn out gendered differences in values to a much greater degree than would be true in less conflicted settings' (Pedelty, 1997, p. 96).

It is indeed an entirely sensible and plausible hypothesis that zones of war, crisis and violent conflict constitute a new environment, largely or totally different from places where journalists normally work; and that in making a complete break with routines, practices and whatever else pertains to the setting and atmosphere of the newsroom, this new environment brings about the emergence and manifestation of gendered differences which would elsewhere be unexpressed, repressed and unobserved. Assuming this as a working hypothesis therefore entails adopting a contextual approach, in order to grasp whether the highly unusual and exceptional factors and situations that are inherent in a war scenario represent or create the 'condition of possibility' for a potential feminine difference in war reporting.

Exceptional also, for their part, are the women journalists themselves who work at the front line. The (male) war reporter has been presented as a heroic, indeed mythical, figure in literature, cinema (Korte, 2006), in the professional culture and in the collective imagination (Knightley, 2002). Nevertheless, we must recognise – not in order to praise them with the dubious intention of settling scores with their male counterparts, but simply to pay tribute to the evidence – that women war reporters, or a good many of them, are quite definitely exceptional personalities:



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brave, tough, determined, not infrequently more fearless than their male colleagues when faced with dangers, more indefatigable and headstrong in following up a story. One of the tasks of my research will be to reconstruct, as far as possible, the human and professional profiles, motivation and goals – who they are, why they do it, what they are aiming for – of women war reporters on the front line.

The professional and personal talents of women war reporters assume an additional interest, in that – together with the weight of the greater feminine presence in theatres of war – they form part of the redefinition of a relevant contextual factor: the atmosphere of their relations with male colleagues. A great many rumours and observations, for the most part unanimous, give credence to the widespread capitulation of suspicious and dismissive attitudes engendered by misogynistic stereotypes (though not the complete disappearance of grounds for tensions and competition between male and female correspondents); instead they testify to the respect inspired by the bravery and dignity with which women reporters demonstrate their ability to cope with the risks of a war situation. 'There is a lot of respect for women by the male correspondents...People understand the risks they are taking and there is a lot of mutual respect' (Tumber and Webster, 2006, p. 97). In this connection it remains to be established whether growing acceptance by colleagues, confidence in their own competence put to the test by the challenges of an area of conflict and, for many if not all women reporters, the gratifications of media popularity, help to create or reinforce among women war reporters the conditions of feminine empowerment that could have certain repercussions on professional approaches and practices.

Nor perhaps is it by chance that women war reporters seem to be the only women journalists to support the theory of 'feminine advantage'. Not that they underestimate, for example, the safety issues connected to the difficult working conditions and to certain specific areas of vulnerability that characterise them as women immersed in areas of violence (Feisten, 2003). Nor, along with the 'prominent women in journalism' cited by Schudson, are they disposed to support the idea of journalism classified by separate gender categories. The feminine advantage, as represented and exemplified by a good number of present-day women war reporters (including some of the most prominent), is in reality another contextual factor in the war environment. In certain ways, paradoxically, its conditions of possibility lie in the sexism and the patriarchal cultures in force in those societies and territories where armed conflict has broken out in recent years. In these traditional localities, where in most cases the feminine condition is that of a subordinate and powerless population, a woman journalist has a better chance of going almost unobserved, or at any rate not seen as a threat by many of those (usually male) who are actively involved in the war ('less of a threat', agree Maggie O'Kane and Janine Di Giovanni). In fact, this means having more freedom of movement and access to places and people: 'I could see a completely different world than my male counterpart', declared a woman war reporter on the Afghanistan war (cited in Krastev, 2004, p.1). The feminine advantage turns out to be a strategic resource in giving access in particular to the daily life of the civilian population, and to the confidence – which would not be as easily conceded to a male journalist – of local women, who are among the main victims and not infrequently the specific target of belligerent violence. In all probability, the victims of mass



rape during the Balkan war would have never agreed to revealing to a male reporter what they confessed to the *Guardian* correspondent and to the BBC's Maggie O'Kane.

4. Making a difference

This last point clearly leads us back to the question that is at the heart of my research: does gender matter and does it make a difference to war reporting? And if so, what constitutes this difference and what is it composed of?

When it is formulated with specific reference to journalistic war coverage, the controversial question of gender difference seems to prompt almost unequivocal responses, remarkably unanimous in identifying a particular 'woman's point of view'. 'It is assumed', as ably summed up by McLaughlin, 'that unlike their male colleagues, women journalists are keen to get beyond the obsession with military hardware and report the human costs of war: suffering, loss and bereavement, displacement and upheaval' (2002, p. 170).

Suffering, human cost, victims, in short the devastating impact of war and violent conflict on civilian populations: a tragic landscape observed with compassion and empathy. If it is true that war coverage by women is characterised by a sharper and more emotionally involved slant towards the human aspect of warlike events, then we should above all guard against regarding this as no more than the slightly updated legacy of an old scheme of division of journalistic labour between men and women: in the case of war correspondents, between the macho 'bang-bang reporter' and the 'sob sister' of the front line. Nor, if the feminine difference lies effectively in the humanistic approach, should we be content to refrain from researching (or indeed demanding) anything that goes beyond this point. I shall try, in bringing my discussions to a close, to elaborate on two interconnected points.

When Janine Di Giovanni, one of the most authoritative and respected war correspondents in European journalism, states (speaking plausibly for many) 'I'm at my best writing about human suffering' (quoted in Ricchiardi, 1994, p. 4), it is clear that she is not merely stating the strong inclination of her interests and talents – no matter whether these are attributable to temperament or gender or anything else – towards the human aspect of war. She is also taking up a position towards tendencies of change that are pervading and reshaping the cultures and practices of Western journalism. Emma Daly, correspondent of the *Independent*, makes it still clearer in her reaction to the criticism of a male colleague during the Balkan war: 'All you people in Sarajevo are obsessed by dead children, and that is simply not the point'. 'But I think that exactly is the point', was her brisk reply. 'I think that war is the greatest human interest story there is' (Daly, 1999, p.278).

It is not merely a choice, a passion and – why not? – a personal obsession that is revealed by these examples, and in many others that could be advanced, but a true reformulation both of the hierarchies of journalistic relevance and of war itself as a journalistic 'story' *par excellence*, traced back in each case to the pre-eminence of human interest. It is difficult (and, let it be said, not



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essential) to establish whether we are faced here with a 'feminisation' of war reporting because of the growing influx of women reporters in scenes of conflict, or whether on the other hand women are now finding a place on the front line because their approach seems consonant with journalism's more general cultural shift towards human interest news and conforms with the much-debated 'journalism of attachment' (Bell, 1997, 1998) that argues (Ward, 1998; MacLaughlin, 2002) that war reporters should distance themselves from the canons of objectivity in favour of greater ethical and emotional involvement. For what it is worth, both hypotheses have their supporters. Suffice it to acknowledge, and to hold the main feminine difference responsible for this, that women reporters have made and continue to make a significant contribution to a war reportage that is more oriented towards the portrayal, one might say the assumption of the burden, of human suffering. If that does not emerge clearly enough in journalistic coverage in the print and broadcasting media, the wealth of autobiography and memoirs by women reporters offers ample testimony of it.

This assumption of the burden of human suffering provoked by wars and violent conflicts calls for a further acknowledgement of worth, when one considers that the rise of women war reporters in the last 20 years has coincided with a sequence of crises and conflicts whose sheer ferocity, unleashed in huge measure on civilian populations, has prompted people to speak of a return to barbarianism (Delpech, 2003). Yet even when media coverage has given an account of dreadful massacres (Seaton, 2005), which does not always happen (see Cohen, 2001), the volatility and short shelf-life of the information means that it is soon forgotten. In so far as they can, women journalists' books recover the memory and preserve it. This is no small bonus.

Nevertheless, the adoption of a perspective of human suffering by women war reporters does not yet offer, in my opinion, a satisfactory response to the question of the difference: not so much, or not only, because women do not have a monopoly of the humanistic approach (even though they are, according to all the evidence, the most fervent and numerous supporters and practitioners of it) but because to stop at this level of knowledge means to leave a crucial question unanswered: in what way is the suffering inflicted by war and conflicts narrated?

I recall here the field of studies on the mediation of suffering that I cited at the beginning. Although this literature has up till now been concerned above all with televisual mediation and has investigated or speculated for preference on the range of reactions of the public when faced with repeated showings of violence and victimisation in pictures and narrative, some of its main concerns can equally provide inspiration and guidance for the work in progress: in particular, reflection on the theme of comprehension and the problematic gap between knowing and understanding. In putting us in contact with the suffering of distant people, the media make it impossible for us to claim not to know, not to have known; we can no longer plead the excuse of ignorance (Tester, 2001, pp 4-5). But whether they also give us access to understanding the suffering of others and the causes that provoke it remains an open question.

This, in conclusion, is the question to which the corpus of war memoirs by women reporters should be subjected. The distressing and often horrifying matters dealt with by many books present a difficult challenge to attempts to understand and explain; and they expose the reader to the perennial risk of seeing nothing but the senselessness of demented humanity in the butchery



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and savagery of present-day wars and conflicts. Michael Ignatieff has formulated the distinction between narratives of chaos and narratives of explanation (1997, p. 98); the latter are clearly those that undertake to try to integrate these events into structures of sense, to reduce the hiatus between knowing and understanding. For that matter, good journalism has always put 'interpretation, explanation, and thick description' at the service of the need 'not only to know but to understand' (Carey, 1986, p. 50-51)

What type of stories do women reporters produce, from the human suffering perspective that informs their observation and reconstruction of wars and conflicts? If the analysis of their autobiographies and memoirs were to reveal them – as a conjecture – to be better versed in narratives of explanation, we would probably have identified an important and distinctive trait: if there is indeed a gender difference, the corpus of analytic and empirical elements identified during the research should be able to clarify it.

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