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# The Politics of Nature: Constructing the German Reunification During the Great Odra Flood 1997<sup>i</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, hailstorms and floods always lead to a massive media coverage as a close look in the fait divers of daily newspapers proves. They seem to have a short-lived but extreme effect on society as well as on the media. One point which is often neglected is the fact that disasters occur in unique socio-historical contexts that determine the patterns of interpretation. This seems to be also the case concerning the Great Odra Flood 1997 inasmuch as the disaster occurred within the singular process of the German reunification. Following especially the German newspapers, the Odra Flood marked the point of the real reunification and therefore efforts to dam the rising waters have been metaphorically interpreted as the joint fight against the flood. It received its political dimension in particular via different types of metaphors that blend synchronic domains of discourse. The present chapter investigates the metaphorical patterns that underlie the news coverage of the flood and relates these to the 'visions of nature' that are the subject matter of the present volume as a whole.

## KEYWORDS

Germany, Odra flood 1997, mass media, language of news media, metaphors, construction of national identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In summer 1997 eastern parts of Germany, especially the region of the so-called Oderbruch near Frankfurt/Oder, were struck by a heavy flood. During **the**

following session about the disaster in the German Bundestag on August 5<sup>th</sup>, the minister-president of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, coined the term of the 'Jahrtausendflut' (millennium flood) and in the same session former chancellor Helmut Kohl acknowledged that a nation-wide solidarity was reuniting the country. Stolpe's notion of the 'Jahrtausendflut' was picked up by many politicians and spread via the mass media to a wider, even if the region had already been hit by comparable floods from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the most remarkable flood came about two years after the end of World War Two, in 1947: A dike burst and more than 20 people lost their lives near Reitwein. In short, high water levels are a quite normal phenomenon in this region of East Germany during spring and summer.<sup>ii</sup> So what happened? In June 1997, heavy rainfalls in the mountains of the Altvatergebirge in the Czech Republic and Poland led to floods which reached the Odra and the Neiße a few days later on. With a delay of several days these floods arrived in the Polish-German Odra region and threatened the dikes and the people living behind them. Consequently, the rising waters attracted the attention of the mass media and led to massive media coverage: the so-called 'silly season' was filled with daily water level news from the Oderbruch. But the flood also occurred in the unique socio-historical context of the German reunification and in many German newspaper articles and TV programs the Odra Flood was interpreted as the real if somewhat delayed reunification, which, however, had already been politically ratified seven years before.

It seems that the flood opened a cultural reservoir by which the efforts to dam the rising waters could be interpreted metaphorically as a *joint fight* against an enemy, personified by the flood. In short, the natural disaster lent itself to developing 'narratives and discourses that signify the sense of nationness'<sup>iii</sup>. In this context, language, and especially metaphors, play an essential role because they make abstract knowledge accessible and help us to categorise and to order the outside world. Or to put it with John Berger:

For an animal its natural environment and habitat are given; for man [...] reality is not given: it has to be continually sought out [...]. Events are always to hand. But the coherence of these events - which is what we mean by reality - is an imaginative construction. Reality always lies beyond [...].<sup>iv</sup>

Berger is trying to underline the fact that man has a kind of experiential understanding of his environment and that 'language, of course, is a tool both for talking about what is already known and for exploring the unknown'<sup>v</sup>. Language is a fundamental prerequisite which forms our concepts and representations of nature and nation, it bridges the gap between both and links these incoherent concepts in order to generate a coherent unity. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to put an emphasis on the influence language in the mass media may have had on a conjured German national identity during the disaster in 1997. The main hypothesis is that the construction of a particular

vision of nature during the Odra flood served as a metaphorical reservoir for illustrating and legitimising the abstract political process of reunification.

In the following section I will briefly outline the discussion among linguists about the term metaphor and its dimension in discourse. Afterwards, a small selection of paradigmatic examples from a corpus of German newspapers may give insights into the metaphorical complexity of news coverage during the flood.<sup>vi</sup> Finally, the linguistic perspective outlined in this paper needs an integration into a more general framework for environmental research. To sum it up briefly: The subtext of my paper is a plea to acknowledge that language - and especially metaphor - plays a decisive role in the construction and understanding of environmental discourse. Metaphor is in fact 'a principle of arrangement and diffusion of knowledge'<sup>vii</sup> that has to be linked with synchronic and diachronic investigations in order to get vital insights into how visions of natural environment are and were perceived and constructed.

## 2. VISIONS OF METAPHOR AND METAPHORICAL VISIONS

Language plays an essential role in forming our perceptions of the environment and our acting in it; it could be understood - metaphorically - as a kind of filter by which we give coherence to the apparent chaos outside, put an order on the environment and have an impact on it. 'Language has the power to evoke images and complex ideas'.<sup>viii</sup> During the past 20 years, the linguistic trope metaphor has achieved special attention in linguistics because research could show that most of our everyday talk is fundamentally metaphoric.<sup>ix</sup> Following the classical perspective metaphor was long regarded as a pure rhetoric phenomenon acting on the level of words and linked to poetic discourse or the aesthetic creativity of authors only.<sup>x</sup> It was therefore not considered as referring to a linguistically describable reality. However, according to most of the linguistic research on metaphor,<sup>xi</sup> it can no longer be regarded as a mere aesthetic figure in poetic discourse but must be understood as a ubiquitous phenomenon and constitutive element of cognition in everyday life as well as in expert discourse and texts.<sup>xii</sup> 'Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it'.<sup>xiii</sup>

One of the basic assumptions is that man does not have direct access to abstract fields of experience or knowledge and that metaphor is one possible mechanism of many others that generates and structures meaning in order to make abstract knowledge accessible. It is a cognitive device that produces meaning by a mapping that connects two domains, the 'source domain' and the 'target domain'. 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another'.<sup>xiv</sup> In short: We try to understand the abstract with the help of something we have already experienced. These basic metaphorical concepts possess a structuring force, a knowledge generating function and they often create networks or models for any kind of discourse.

Consequently, metaphors have a great impact on how our patterns of knowledge are structured and organised: ‘Not only did they guide people’s everyday behaviour, but they were systematised and formalised as theories and guiding principles for dealing with nature’<sup>xv</sup>, they constitute the human systems of imagination<sup>xvi</sup>, they form a ‘system of associated common places’<sup>xvii</sup> or they could be understood as idealised cognitive models<sup>xviii</sup>, ‘folk theories’<sup>xix</sup> or visions.

Apart from the terminological and methodological differences among all the notions used above, the theories unite in two essential points: First, metaphors have a categorising force for the human experience and the human perception of the world.<sup>xx</sup> Second, metaphors possess a specific function in ordering and reordering of knowledge ‘and thus can serve as prime targets and tools of analyses in the realm of knowledge dynamics’.<sup>xxi</sup> Thus, the human access to reality is deeply mediated and influenced by metaphor that enlarges the natural ecosystem with cultural aspects: the natural and the cultural ecosystems are blended together into a Nature-Culture-Ecosystem in which metaphor (and language in general) is the ‘missing link’<sup>xxii</sup> between both realms. These considerations lead us deep into the well known dichotomy of nature and culture. Nature and culture are blended into one another by metaphor, by which they become a kind of mixture, a hybrid or relatively real vision.<sup>xxiii</sup> Or to put it the other way round: there may be an objective nature, but we can only have an experiential human vision or understanding of it – a vision in the most extended understanding of it! In short, metaphor is a linguistic and cognitive trope that raises questions about language and reality as well as questions concerning the framework of language and power<sup>xxiv</sup>, i.e. questions about preferred or more legitimate visions of nature. Briefly, the reality of ideologies<sup>xxv</sup> consists of metaphors by which these ideologies live by. This means that the language of news media does not take a neutral position, on the contrary, it frames<sup>xxvi</sup> the disaster in a special way which is deeply influenced by the prevailing political context. ‘Language and the world can be regarded as mutually interrelated’<sup>xxvii</sup>, and mass media are one discursive channel to connect and structure them. So the news speak is a kind of speaking in an unique context under unique conditions.<sup>xxviii</sup> In other words, all these kinds of linguistic acting represent a structure, i.e. a sum of speech acts (photographs, caricatures etc.) which is directed via the media-channel towards a subject, and this creates or redefines a domain of discourse. Consequently, discourse is more than just language, it is a kind of social practice which consists of language, contextual aspects, rules, preferences etc. And in this context metaphors play an essential role because they create changing networks of knowledge within these discourses, they represent modes of perception, thinking and acting<sup>xxix</sup>. Thus, metaphor is a particle which runs through all levels. Concerning the present case, the notion of discourse is limited to the textual representation of language by which the disaster is framed in the mass media. But none the less, it is a discursive practice that is ‘constitutive in both conventional and creative ways: it contributes to

reproducing society (social identities, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief) as it is, yet also contributes to transforming society'<sup>xxx</sup>. Therefore, media discourse is a kind of acting on things and it offers a variety of possible interpretations or visions of nature, too.

Besides the main medium language, maps and also photographs (see illustration 1 and 2) are important means of information. Their function could be understood as a three-dimensional relationship which consists of information, education and certainly entertainment.<sup>xxxii</sup> Hence, journalists find a kind of raw material already 'mediated' by agencies or collected by themselves during their fieldwork, and this material has to be formatted for the reader. Different parts from it have to be evaluated and rearranged in order to construct a newsworthy article for the next issue.<sup>xxxiii</sup> News are in fact a product at the end of a complex process of construction: '[...] It [the news, M.D.] is a subjective construction which is put together by people who themselves are influenced by their own perceptions of social reality. It is this reality which is constructed through the product'<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

So mass media rearrange and construct newsworthy items like risks and disasters and this might also be the reason why we have so many environmental realities and mediated natures because 'it is shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics [...]. Today nature is filmed, pictured, written, and talked about everywhere'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> To cut a long story short: the different media discourses construct a heterogeneity of 'contested natures'<sup>xxxv</sup>. Special linguistic structures like metaphors and in fact pictures frame the subject and highlight certain aspects, while they hide others. So the media discourse offers a selective perspective on certain aspects because 'journalists, in particular, are charged with the responsibility of imposing meaning upon uncertainties [...]'<sup>xxxvi</sup>. All these aspects mentioned create a discourse that acts on things, or in other words: 'discourse and practices [...] accomplish the world for us.'<sup>xxxvii</sup> And it is of a common interest to get '[...] vital insights into how the media accounts construct preferred definitions of environmental realities'<sup>xxxviii</sup>. The next section therefore offers a selection and a interpretation of metaphors used in German newspapers during the Odra flood. The examples are mostly taken from daily newspapers published during summer 1997.

### 3. FRAMING THE ODRA FLOOD: METAPHORS AT WORK

Metaphors are a ubiquitous phenomenon in so-called 'news speak', irrespective of the facts that are described or the column in which the article appears. A close look at the newspaper coverage during the Odra flood in 1997 shows clearly that personifications, for instance, play a central role in understanding what happened.<sup>xxxix</sup> Thus, the river is metaphorically

conceptualised as a kind of being or person which is acting intentionally as the following example shows:

Example 1:

*'Nun gehört es zum Wesen der meisten Flüsse, daß ihr Wasserstand im Wechsel der Jahreszeiten schwankt. Manche Flüsse trocknen zeitweise aus, andere treten bei Hochwasser über die Ufer.'* (Die Welt, 29.7.1997)

(It belongs to the nature of most rivers that their level of water is changing during the seasons. Some rivers dry up and others trespass the bank during high-water.)

Here, rivers are conceptualised as beings or creatures that can control their behaviour - an aspect which could only be metaphorically attributed to it because in western culture rivers are in fact no beings or creatures. But if we think about the fact that in antiquity gods and personifications of rivers were important and their statues were honoured and highly respected<sup>x1</sup>, we find at least a historical reference to the practise of personification. The German verb *übertreten* (step across) connotes in this context an ongoing and slow motion which, however, is not as threatening as in the following example:

Example 2:

Unvermindert *drückt die Oder auf die Deiche*. (Tageszeitung 1.8.1997, Headline)

(The Odra is pressing on the dikes with undiminished force)

Intentional actions can be expressed by different verbs. The next quote conceptualises the flooding as the victory of the river in an old fight with its opponent, the dike:

Example 3:

Zweihundertfünfzig Jahre nach den ersten Eindeichungsversuchen im Oderbruch *scheint sich der Fluß sein zwangsweise abgetretenes Land mit aller Macht zurückerobern zu wollen*. (Die Welt, 28.7.1997)

(Two hundred and fifty years after the first steps towards building dykes in the Oderbruch, the river seems to reconquer the land taken away from it.)

The Verb *zurückerobern* (reconquer) makes reference to an implicit war scenario: man (or his work: the dike) and the river seem to have been at war for more than 250 years. The power and intensity with which the river is fighting against man is often expressed with compounds like *Wassermassen* (masses of water).

Example 4:

Noch *lassen die Wassermassen der Oder weder Hilfsmannschaften noch den Brandenburger Landespolitikern kaum eine Atempause*. (Die Welt, 28.7.1997)

(The masses of water do not give a breather to the troop of helpers or the local politicians of Brandenburg.)

In this example, the threat is impressively described by the noun *Atempause* (breather): The essential action of breathing seems to be hardly possible for the

people engaged in securing the dykes. In the following more elaborate and creative example the river is compared to an alligator:

Example 5:

Zäh und glatt fließt die Oder mit gespenstischer Lautlosigkeit. *Wie ein lauerner Alligator schiebt sie sich braun und massig die deutsch-polnische Grenze entlang.*

(Tageszeitung, 18.7.1997)

(The Odra is running glutinously and eerily without any sound, moving its brown masses along the German-Polish frontier like a lurking alligator.)

The river becomes a threatening animal. This image is a very common one which draws on the cultural experiences we all have from films in TV-programs. The narration opens a very calm if sinister scenario by the expression *gespenstische Lautlosigkeit* (running glutinously and without any sound). One might see the alligator swimming in the water with just its eyes and nose sneaking out of the water. It is waiting for prey - the dyke - and the adjectives *braun* and *massig* (moving its brown masses) seem to fit well in this scenario. Threat and danger seem to be the most obvious characteristics here.

As we have seen in the preceding examples, water is metaphorically conceived as a wild beast or a kind of threatening and acting being to which dangerous qualities can be ascribed. This seems to be the way by which another scenario, the scenario of fight, can be established: man and river become opponents. As we see in the following examples, the idea of a fight against the enemy river appears almost in every newspaper.

Example 6:

Verzweifelter *Kampf um die Deiche* (Handelsblatt, 1.8.1997)

(Desperate fight for the dikes)

Example 7:

Verzweifelter *Kampf um das Oderbruch* (Die Welt, 1.8.1997)

(Desperate fight for the Oderbruch)

Example 8:

Dramatischer *Kampf um Deich am Oderbruch* (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1.8.1997)

(Dramatic fight for dike in the Oderbruch)

Example 9:

Im *Kampf gegen das Hochwasser* [...](Die Welt, 4.8.1997)

(Fighting against the flood)

Example 10:

Im *Kampf gegen die Wassermassen* (TAZ, 10.8.1997, Titel)

(Fighting against the masses of water)

The metaphor of fight seems to be a relevant and conventionalized semantic notion since it allows to view nature as a living being or entity that can be fought against.<sup>xli</sup> Nature, or more precisely the water, is implicitly personified as an enemy. The scenario established implies two entities who fight for something

(in the first three examples for the dike) by using their force against one another. In example 9 the opponent is clearly mentioned as the flood and the fight is qualified by the adjectives ‘desperate’ and ‘dramatic’, whereas in example 10 an accent is put on the masses or the weight of water man has to fight against. But the metaphor of fight also opens the way to metaphors of war by which the fight between man and nature can be understood in a more differentiated and subtle way – flood narratives are often framed in military terms, due to the scale of threat. Consequently, war with nature becomes a battle like in the following quotes:

Example 11:

*Materialschlacht* der Superlative gegen das Hochwasser (Die Welt, 11.8.1997)  
(Superlative matériel battle against the flood)

Example 12:

Eine *Materialschlacht* ohnegleichen: Bilanz der Katastrophe (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11.8.1997)  
(Unparalleled matériel battle: Taking stock of the disaster)

The connotation in this context is evident: the matériel is sandbags and not human lives, - more than 7 million sandbags were prepared which means that about 150,000 tons of sand were put into them to dam the rising waters. But the metaphor *Materialschlacht* (matériel battle) seems a bit strange because it reminds us of the last battle in the *Seelower Höhen* near the Oderbruch<sup>xlii</sup> - in the present context it makes reference to a more general type of war which is conducted with high matériel and technological input to sustain the defence against the rising waters. Once opened, the war scenario seems to be an appropriate way of describing the conflict going on between man and the river. Thus, the helicopters which transported reinforcements turn into sandbag-bombers:

Example 13:

*Sandsack-Bomber*: Aus der Luft wurde der Nachschub für die Verstärkung der Deiche bei Hohenwutzen im Oderbruch herbeigeschafft. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30.7.1997)  
(Sandbag-Bomber: The reinforcements to strengthen the dikes near Hohenwutzen in the Oderbruch were transported through the air.)

And also other parts of the *Bundeswehr* (the German Army) were metaphorically integrated into this war scenario:

Example 14:

Sie sind mit *Schaufeln bewaffnet*, ihr *Schlachtfeld* ist ein schmaler Streifen zwischen Schwedt und Eisenhüttenstadt, ihr *Feind ist unberechenbar*. *Er greift auf ganzer Linie an*, immer wieder, und wenn er der *Sandsack-Infanterie ein weiteres Stück entreißen will*, *kommen die Bomber*. (Der Stern, 7.8.1997)  
(They [the soldiers, M.D.] are armed with shovels, their battlefield is a small area between Schwedt and Eisenhüttenstadt, their enemy is unpredictable. He attacks the



sandbag-infantry all along the line and whenever he seems to be winning territory, the bombers [the sandbag bombers] do their job.)

All parts of the *Bundeswehr* seem to be engaged in the battle. Shovels become arms and the space between land and water is the front line where war between the unpredictable waters and the *Sandsack-Infanterie* takes place, and help comes from above, from the *Sandsack-Bomber*. A more elaborated war scenario is hardly possible!

In times of war tactics are very important. You **lose** positions like in the following example where the masses of water break the dike and the people give up in order to concentrate their defence on intact dikes:

Example 15:

Schließlich wurde der Kampf aufgegeben. [...] alle *Kräfte würden nun auf die Verteidigung* der noch intakten Deiche in den anderen Hochwassergebieten gerichtet. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24.7.1997)

(Finally, they stopped the fight. [...] all forces were now to be directed to the defence of the intact dikes in the other areas threatened by the flood.)

You have weak positions or areas where the enemy might attack like in the next example where the threatened dike is compared to Achilles' heel:

Example 16:

Der *Oderdeich bei Hohenwutzen erweist sich immer mehr als Achillesferse* des gesamten Hochwasserschutzsystems. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30.7.1997)

(The dike near Hohenwutzen is more and more like Archilles' heel in the whole flood-prevention-system)

The river seems to have intentions or to pursue certain tactics like in the following example where it seems to wait for the best moment for a second attack:

Example 17:

Bis Freitag *hat der Fluß mit dem zweiten Angriff gewartet*. (Frankfurter Rundschau, 26.7.1997)

(The river waited until Friday to start its second attack)

And of course besides water the river possesses its own weapons like torpedo-tree-trunks which threaten the dykes:

Example 18:

*Torpedo-Baumstämme* bedrohen die Deiche. (Der Stern, 7.8.1997)

(Torpedo tree-trunks threaten the dikes)

Example 19:

*Neue Gefahr droht* durch vollgesogene Baumstämme aus den polnischen Hochwassergebieten. Sie treiben mit hoher Geschwindigkeit durch das Wasser. Nach Einschätzung des Technischen Hilfswerks können sie 'wie Torpedos die aufgeweichten *Deiche rammen*'. (Die Welt, 2.8.1997)

(A new danger comes from tree trunks from the drowned Polish areas floating fast up/down the river. According to the expertise of the *Technische Hilfswerk*, they could ram the soaked dykes like torpedos.)

These few examples taken from a much bigger sample of collected quotes may show how the flood was conceptualised in terms of fight and war which consequently opened the vision of a battle - compare the map taken from the magazine *Der Stern* (Illustration 1) which only shows positions taken by the *Bundeswehr*, other relief actions supported by the *Technische Hilfswerk* (German Society for Technical Support and Disaster Prevention) or the *Deutsches Rotes Kreuz* (German Red Cross) do not appear!

But the battle was a special one which was fought by the *Bundeswehr* and by the people. It was framed in media discourse as a joint and reunited fight.

Example 20:

*Vereint hinterm Deich* (Hamburger Abendblatt, 6.8.1997)  
(Re)united behind the dike)

Example 20 refers not only to the united forces to fight against the flood. In this special context, it refers to the reunited German forces. A comparable accent can also be found in the following examples:

Example 21:

*Alle stemmen sich gegen die Flut* (Hamburger Abendblatt, 2.8.1997)  
(Everybody is stemming himself against the flood)

Example 22:

*Der Kampf gegen das Wasser eint und weist jeden an seinen Platz.* (Frankfurter Rundschau, 21.7.1997)  
(The fight against the water unites and tells everybody where he belongs)

We find a reading here that makes reference not only to the soldiers and the population carrying sandbags along the Oderbruch; emphasis is also implicitly put on the fact that Germans from east and west fought together against the flood with sandbags and donations.<sup>xliii</sup> This culminated in the following metaphor from the former German President Roman Herzog during a visit in Hohenwutzen:

Example 23:

Für Präsident Herzog wirkt das Hochwasser wie ein *Bindemittel* (Frankfurter Rundschau, 8.8.1997)  
(For president Herzog the flood works like a great binding agent)

In this example, the flood is conceptualised as a catalyst that can bring on the reunification process. The people from East and West Germany are therefore indirectly metaphorized as two substances which, through their joint fight against the flood, are about to merge into a single substance.

Likewise, water seems to possess a kind of cathartic force like in the following quote:

Example 24:

Als im Jahr sieben nach der Einheit die Oder über die Ufer trat gab es keine 'Wessis' und 'Ossis' mehr. *Die Unterschiede waren weggespült.* (Die Welt, 14.8.1997)

(During year seven after the reunification when the Odra crossed the bank the differences between people from the West and from the East did not exist any longer. The differences were washed away.)

And at the heart of the process of learning from and knowing each other lies the knowledge about a reunited flood-experience:

Example 25:

Wobei den Menschen in den neuen Ländern Veränderungen leichter fallen als manchen reformfreudigen West-Bürgern, die noch nicht erkannt haben, daß auch bei ihnen auf Dauer nichts so bleiben wird wie es war, und daß auch sie sich verändern müssen. Doch vielleicht haben die Menschen aus der *gemeinsamen Flut-Erfahrung* gelernt. (Die Welt, 14.8.1997)

(Most of the people in the *neue Länder* (new federal states) will not have such problems with the changes like the people from the West who do not yet recognise that nothing will last as it was and that they will have to change. But maybe they have learned from their flood-experience.)

And for the *Bundeswehr*, too, the battle against the flood had positive consequences in times of reviving racism:

Example 26:

Die *Bundeswehr schwimmt auf einer Woge von Zustimmung.* Nach ihrem erfolgreichen Einsatz gegen das Hochwasser der Oder ist das verständlich. (Die Welt, 28.8.1997)

(The *Bundeswehr* is swimming/surfing on a wave of approval. This is understandable after its successful campaign against the Odra flood.)

This seems to be an essential effect the flood had on the image of the *Bundeswehr* and it helped the armed forces to redefine a new identity as an intervention army within the NATO and later on in the UN.

There are of course many other aspects that should be treated here but emphasis has to be put on the metaphorical construction of the German reunification in the context of the flood. Other domains of discourse like questions concerning the interplay of climate change, deforestation and the conservation of nature in the Oderbruch have been left aside. These are also very important areas which are often linked to the deluge metaphor, as the last quote exemplifies:

Example 27:

*Sintflut und Menschenwerk* (Frankfurter Rundschau, 25.7.1997)

(Deluge and human impact)

As we have seen, metaphors play an essential role in the German newspaper articles published during the Odra flood in 1997. The high presence of metaphors of fight in the mass media prepared a background on which a much more elaborated form of war metaphors generated a war vision or a metaphorically structured vision of 'war with nature'. Of course man has never been in war with nature because nature does not act intentionally - following our western understanding of it! But the metaphorical construction helps the human being to react and to act more or less adequately in times of danger. The frequent and stereotyped use of fight and war metaphors in the newspapers and TV programs also generated a feeling of a national threat that created a discourse of war. This discourse was in fact the result of a metaphorically generated vision that was combined with the actual context, i.e. the German reunification.

#### 4. THE POLITICS OF NATURE AND VISIONS OF NATURE

Natural disasters always lead to massive media coverage because of their spectacular and dramatic potential for the news. In this domain of discourse metaphors play an essential role because they frame the unknown by means of aspects that are already known. But news coverage shows more, it is a phenomenon which in fact makes reference to urgent social questions. In short, the disaster is framed or integrated into a schema of perception by which society constitutes and reorganises its own structure.<sup>xliv</sup> In the present context, the question concerning the German reunification was the most prominent one and the disaster served as a reservoir to constitute the image of a reunited Germany. Indeed, the Germans successfully defended the land which Friedrich II. took away from the Odra 250 years before<sup>xlv</sup> and during the disaster a myth of foundation was born: The fight with the rising waters was combined in the media with the search for a reunited national identity. One might therefore conclude that natural disasters help constitute societies and nations, they are an essential part of their narratives. During the Odra Flood many East and West Germans fell in love while carrying sandbags - like the couple in illustration 2: This is love at first dike. The Odra helped the Germans to strengthen - for a short period of time - their national identity or, to put it ironically following the slogans of the Monday demonstrations in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR): We are the people, we are the dike!<sup>xlvi</sup>

How could all this be related to the 'Visions of Nature'? Obviously, what we have seen are the conventional metaphorical concepts MAN AS MASTER AND POSSESSOR OF NATURE, NATURE IS AN ENEMY, CONFLICT WITH NATURE IS A FIGHT or CONFLICT WITH NATURE IS A WAR that generate the somehow conventional visions of nature<sup>xlvii</sup> First of all, each of these constructs undergo a permanent change, they represent 'different layers [...] [of] interaction between humans and the natural environment'.<sup>xlviii</sup> These

layers of representations or visions constitute a resonating and changing network, especially during natural disasters. Calamities in fact highlight and hide several visions of nature, they re-motivate patterns of interpretation and require for a change of conventional visions of nature a strong collective desire to invert them – see the earthquake of Lisbon that destroyed not only a city but inverted a whole philosophical tradition and worldview via a high media impact.<sup>xlix</sup> Consequently, extremely constructed visions of nature are possible to emerge in times of disasters and they can easily be linked with singular political events. And this is precisely what happened during the Odra Flood in 1997. But several notes have to be made here.

First, the political connotations of disasters always change. During the Elbe Flood in 2002, at least some references were made to the different identities of east and west Germans but they were drowned away by the more prominent questions concerning the interrelation of floods and climate change and the Bundestagswahlen.

Second, the arrangement of conventional or collective visions may not be affected by the creative or surface visions – a counter example is nevertheless the storm surge in Hamburg in 1962 which is deeply encored in the German collective memory. However, the people involved in and affected by the Odra Flood are ‘average’ Europeans and there is no reasons to think that the somehow conventional visions of nature (MAN IS THE STEWARD OF NATURE, see van den Born this volume) were washed away – metaphorically speaking – under the linguistic flood of nature-as-enemy metaphors. War metaphors may reappear during the next high water levels but the context might be another one as the patterns of interpretation will differ. So speaking about a collective memory might be a profitable enterprise with regard to the linguistic surface structure but the attribution of meaning to it will have to avoid the trap of overgeneralization and must be closely linked to the context.

Moreover, what is at stake is an expanded humanly based and integrated management of environmental matters, and in this context the investigation of visions of nature may be a very profitable venture. The main aim of the present paper was to sensitise the reader for the role language plays in framing a singular and somehow ‘natural’ event in the mass media. Other works, like the those in this volume, may contribute to a much deeper understanding of the perception of nature. But after all one has to be very careful with the profitable but somehow dangerous and tempting investigation of culturally generated visions of nature: There is not a monoculture of visions of nature, there is a huge diversity!

## NOTES

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#### Illustrations

1. Map taken from *Der Stern*, 7.8.1997
2. Photography taken from *Hamburger Morgenpost* 7.8.1997

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<sup>ii</sup> Müller 1997, 44-48.

<sup>iii</sup> Bahbah 1990, 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Berger 1985, 278-279.

<sup>v</sup> Harré/Brockmeier/Mühlhäusler 1999, 91.

<sup>vi</sup> All examples have been taken from CD-Rom or online archives of the following newspapers: *Hamburger Abendblatt*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, *TAZ*, *Das Handelsblatt*, *Die Zeit* and *Der Stern*.

<sup>vii</sup> Maasen/Weingart 2001, 21.

<sup>viii</sup> Chawla 2001, 115.

<sup>ix</sup> Due to the seminal work of the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson (Lakoff/Johnson 1980) the discussion about metaphor has been taken up again. The main point in the works of Lakoff and Johnson and their followers is that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive tool by which man generates meaning and experiences the world, it is a bridge between the inside and the outside world. For a complex discussion of the different dimensions of metaphor see also Ortony 1993 and the bibliographies provided by van Noppen/de Knop/Jongen 1985 and Noppen/Hols 1990.

<sup>x</sup> The classical view represents the so-called comparison model of metaphor. Aristotle and Quintilian are the most prominent representatives.

<sup>xi</sup> Ortony 1993.

<sup>xii</sup> Weinrich 1976.

<sup>xiii</sup> Lakoff/Turner 1989, XI.

<sup>xiv</sup> Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 5.



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- <sup>xv</sup> Harré/Brockmeier/Mühlhäusler 1999, 93.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Haefliger 1996, Weinrich 1976.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Black 1963, 40.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Lakoff 1987.
- <sup>xix</sup> Holland/Quinn 1997.
- <sup>xx</sup> Finke 2001, 88.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Maasen/Weingart 2001, 37.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Finke 1996, 39. See also Finke 2002, 21-22.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Latour 1998, 18-21.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Fairclough 1989.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Volosinov 1975, 54.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Goffman 1974.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Trampe 2001, 233.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Austin 1969. See also Mühlhäusler 2001, 163, who pledges for an interactionist view of language and who categorises the European languages as object-dominated: 'Many standard European languages can be regarded as object-dominated because of their strong tendency to covert processural verbs into abstract, object-like nouns. For example, the subject matter of linguistics is not perceived as the activity of speaking but as an object termed 'language'. One of the consequences for this area of enquiry is that, while speaking always involves people, and a spatial, temporal situation, the abstract term *language* suggests an object that can be analysed as something self-contained.'
- <sup>xxix</sup> Maasen/Weingart 2001, 9.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Fairclough 1993, 65.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Meunier 1994, 57.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Campbell 1999, 62.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Campbell 1999, 159.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Wilson 1992, 12.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Macnaghten/Urry 1998.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Allan/Adam/Carter 2000, 12.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Maasen/Weingart 2001, 34.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Allan/Adam/Carter 2000, 2.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Lakoff/Turner 1989, 72-80.
- <sup>xl</sup> Falter 1999.
- <sup>xli</sup> Linguists also talk of dead metaphors (cf. Traugott 1985). This means that a metaphor has found its way into the lexis of a language and is no longer perceived as a linguistic trope.
- <sup>xlii</sup> During World War II the last heavy battle between the *Wehrmacht* and the Russian army took place near the *Seelower Höhen* in the Oderbruch. The Russian army won with heavy losses and was afterwards able to conquer directly to Berlin.
- <sup>xliii</sup> During the flood *Oderflut Galas* were held on several TV programs. The money collected there was transferred to the administration. This led to a *Spendenflut* (flood of donations) which was followed by severe organisational problems concerning the transfer of money to the people who needed it.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Pfister/Brändli 1999, 298. See also Pfister 2002.
- <sup>xlv</sup> From 1747-1753 the landscape of the Nieder-Oderbruch underwent a total change because of cultivation activities directed by Friedrich II. Formally known as a swamp-land inhabited by the Wenden and yearly hit by river floods, the Bruch was drained and

became a landscape where farmers from all over the country, Poland and Austria settled. More than 1250 families 'colonised' the Nieder-Oderbruch and more than 40 new villages were founded. See Kaup 1994, Herrmann/Kaup 1997.

<sup>xlvi</sup> During the demonstrations against the former regime of the GDR, the people shouted 'Wir sind das Volk' (we are the people). This was ironically turned into 'Wir sind der Deich' (We are the dike) by Johannes Wilms in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (5.8.1997).

<sup>xlvii</sup> More general metaphorical concepts will be written in great characters. See also Lakoff/Johnson 1980.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Mühlhäusler 1996, 105.

<sup>xlix</sup> Breidert 1994, 1.