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Author: Nina Mickwitz

Author Email: N.Mickwitz@uea.ac.uk

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Nina Mickwitz, School of Film and TV, University of East Anglia

Displacing the Heroic Soldier in Emmanuel Guibert's *Alan's War*

Abstract

Emmanuel Guibert's *Alan's War* (FirstSecond, 2008) renders the account of one man's remembered experiences during WW2 in Europe. Arriving in France on the 19th of February 1945, the young G.I.'s experience of war is one dominated not by fierce battle but auxiliary deployments, the strategic importance and aims of which often remain hazy to the men in the platoon. Instead interpersonal relationships, chance encounters and incidents form the thread of the narrative. The small scale and mundane turns and events are recollected with clarity and brought to the fore, undermining the mythology of heroic warfare as a dramatic event. In addition, several incidents foreground the disparity between experience on the ground and administrative agendas, whether strategic or in the construction of authoritative versions of events.

This paper aims to highlight the double displacement performed through Alan's story; war through the eyes of a young soldier whose deployments take him through foreign countries while often only partially aware of the exact whys and wherefores, and the discrepancy between official versions of history and the lived experiences which are subsumed by such accounts.

Emmanuel Guibert's *Alan's War* (FirstSecond, 2008) tells the story of one man's remembered experiences during WW2 in Europe. Originally published under the titles *La Guerre d'Alan* (2000), *La Guerre d'Alan 2* (2002) and *La Guerre d'Alan 3* (2008) by L'Association, it recounts the story of a young American G.I., originally from Santa Barbara, California. Cope was drafted following the bombing of Pearl Harbour, underwent training as a radio operator and arrived in Europe in February 1945, on the day of his 20th birthday.

In the preface Guibert explains how he met and befriended Alan Cope, who had returned to live in France after the war, in 1994, and the collaboration between the two men which lasted over five years. Alan recounted his war time experiences, Guibert recorded their sessions and produced the graphic narrative. After Alan's death in 1999 Guibert visited California and Germany; he sought out the places and met some of the people he had been told about, thus being able to add to his depictions through first hand experience.

Guibert's drawing, a mixture of inked outlines, delicate washes and stipple effects, combines subtle tonal variation with constant play between positive and negative space. Its fluid, yet almost blunt line-work depicting figures contrasts with the lack of outline in many of the backgrounds. Here the tonal range, with its subtle gradations has rich associations of photographic representations (up until

colour photography and printing). At times it is evident that photographic references have been used to inform the images, but clearly much is also drawn directly in response to and in an attempt to visualise the story told by Alan Cope. In the preface Guibert states:

'The few mistakes he asked me to correct were strictly of a documentary nature – a vehicle, an insignia, or the shape of a soldier's foxhole, for example. For the rest, I was free to draw his life as my imagination represented it to me. Sometimes my drawings bore only a distant resemblance to what he had lived; the setting or the people weren't true to life. He accepted it as one of the conditions for our work. At other times, he was astounded that a scene he had described to me only in general terms matched his memory of it down to the smallest detail' .

The disparity between decisive and affirmative line-work, and the vagueness implied by the ink-wash effect, emphasising textures, thus visually alludes to the inconsistencies and uneven character of memory. The acknowledgement of inconsistencies, both in representation of one's own memory, and possibly the even more precarious undertaking of representing events remembered by someone else is explicitly expressed in the preface, and tacit in the work itself through the recurring depictions of figures against an empty ground.

This paper aims to highlight the double displacement performed through Alan's story; firstly, war through the eyes of a young soldier whose deployments take him through foreign countries while often only partially aware of the exact whys and wherefores. Secondly, the discrepancy between official versions of history and the lived experiences which are subsumed by such accounts.

Lomsky-Feder (2004) explains that personal memories of soldiers are embedded within and derive their meaning from collective cultural memory. 'The personal narrative of war veterans should be read as a "cultural text" that interweaves private experiences with collective representations that constitute the memory field of war' (Lomsky-Feder, 2004: 4). She also maintains that the cultural understanding of war as traumatic event, prominent since the aftermath of WWI, remains accompanied by the narrative of personal self-sacrifice for the greater good, and of masculinity realised 'to the highest possible degree'; in other words, the image of the heroic soldier. At the time when Alan was drafted cultural myths about war were circulated not only through literature or folklore. Ideas about what a soldier could expect and war stories were a staple of the movie industry, as we are shown (Guibert, 2008: 44).

In addition Lomsky-Feder points out that remembrance is a process through and within which the interpretation of the past takes place in the context of present and projected needs and as an act of on-going and revisionary identity construction. Alan Cope, the eponymous protagonist of *Alan's*

War, falls somewhat to the side of national constructions of WWII. He arrives in Europe as a young American G.I. who approaches the experience as 'an adventure'. But the impact it has is more far-reaching than he is able to foresee. Alan eventually returns to France, to live, after finding reintegration into American society problematic. It seems that for Alan, having gone through defining experiences during the last months of the war in Europe he finds it easier to adapt to post-war life in places and surrounded by people who also were deeply and directly affected by their experience of the war. Or, it might be argued, the way Alan remembers and tells his story; what he re-presents, is consistent with an identity construction which falls outside any particular national memory field of WW2.

Alan's stories and anecdotes are not ones of fierce battles, dramatic advances, surrenders or encounters with the enemy, nor graphic accounts of injury, suffering and death. Instead what we get is a meandering episodic account in which personal and chance encounters become the focal points through which the narrative takes its shape. It would seem that Alan considers himself one of millions of people who more or less unwittingly have been caught up in the wheels of history, and among whom he experiences a series of formative encounters, some brief, some which develop into long lasting friendships. Alan's story is more of a coming of age narrative, than it is a story of war in the way we might have come to expect. Samuel Hynes (1998: 4-5) describes the kind of war narrative based on soldiers' testimony as 'something like travel writing, something like autobiography, something like history'. But a travel narrative which does not render the landscapes described familiar, a life-story account more like a conversion story in which irregular and atypical experiences have formative effect, and a history not concerned with exact dates or locations (ibid: 5-16).

Hynes also describes WWII as defined by '*space and movement*' (ibid: 116). Both these terms are key features in Alan's story of the war, which is one of roaming from deployment to deployment through an unknown continent which is further estranged by the after-effects and ravages of war. Among Alan's very first experiences of being a soldier is spending two months in a small village in Normandy because the unit's tanks, jeeps and artillery have been misplaced. 'It was a completely crazy situation' (Guibert, 2008: 99: 3). The absurdity is underlined by the image; we see the back of a soldier, arms akimbo, exchanging stares with an expressionless sheep.

Once they are reunited with their hardware the platoon drives through France towards the Rhine, crossing into Germany and heading towards Pilsen in Czechoslovakia. Later on in this mission, eventually revealed to be in order to prevent Russian troops advancing further west in the aftermath of German surrender, they are according to Alan literally without maps. Although he retrospectively

pieces together the reasons for their deployment it seems clear that at the time Alan and his brigade are utterly disconnected. Disconnected in an unknown landscape –and disconnected as to the reasons and purposes of their eastward movement, neither privy to where nor why. But as Hynes (1998: 11) makes clear: ‘*Why* is not a soldier’s question’.

The countering of notions of heroism intersperse this story. Alan explains how he is awarded the Purple Heart after the war. The men sleep under the rafters of a barn and make their way up and down on a ladder. When one day someone has moved the ladder, Alan tumbles to the ground and hurts his leg. After the war has ended all American soldiers who were injured in any way are awarded a Purple Heart medal. Although this, fortunately enough for Alan, is the only time he gets hurt, when he tells the story to a sergeant who amasses the list for Purple Heart commendations he is included anyway. Thus Alan receives an award for bravery for an accidental and minor injury, probably caused by a prank¹.

Panels 5-6 on page 105 and the full length vertical first panel on page 106 stand out by the way they visually dramatise this event and the effect is further emphasised by the turning of the page which takes place between them. In the first two Guibert uses the panel borders and the gutter between them to separate Alan’s foot stepping onto what he believes to be the top rung of the ladder from the rest of the figure. He is looking sideways in the upper panel, clearly assuming that he can rely on his familiarity with the descent. In the panel beneath, his foot in the top right-hand corner steps off into an expanse of empty space. On the next page a black silhouette of a falling figure, followed by the array of things he had been carrying in his arms contrasts starkly against the white of the page. The positioning of the figure in the lower part of otherwise empty vertical panel dramatically accentuates the velocity of his fall. Using strategies unique to the comics form this scene evokes a more profound loss of equilibrium than the mere physical plummet off a roof.

For a narrative of war, descriptions of violence and death are conspicuously muted, if not altogether absent. The horror is hinted at but never rendered. There is only one incident of violent death described in any detail, and that is told in the same anecdotal and low key tone characterising the story overall. As German troops withdraw from Prague and the Americans advance in the opposite direction Alan watches a small German soldier who walks in front of tank to guide it through the city streets stop and stare at the American convoy. The tank commander, not realising this, just carries

¹ In Alan’s own estimation, the bravest thing he does during the war is staying with, and talking down, a disorientated and aggressive sergeant who after a night of heavy drinking begins wielding a large knife.

on and the soldier is pulled under and crushed by the tank. This is a pointless and banal death, which passes largely unnoticed- a soldier literally crushed by the machinery of war, made all the more tragic by its futility; the man is killed by his own tank and after fighting has ceased. What is all the more poignant then, is that this is the one scene of death Alan chooses to tell us.

Another episode points to the somehow trite and arbitrary way in which dishonourable acts may come about, and the disorienting dynamics the soldiers find themselves in. On the one hand, the code of war asserts that soldiers carry responsibility for their nation's cause and defence, that they are expected to and are justified to kill, and to be killed in the interest of a greater good, which in configuration with the discipline of military life is imbued with the notion of *nobility*. On the other, soldiers on the ground are bereft of the rationale and decision-making which ultimately guides their fate in the arenas of war, thus denied responsibility for their own actions. This incident describes how Alan is party to, and indeed by his own admission incites a looting incident. This seems incongruous with the image Alan presents of himself as a young man through most of this story. But when the armoured car driving in front of the tank hits a mine (not causing any major damage or injury) –the soldiers decide to loot the village out of a sense of revenge. Alan takes a watch from a dresser drawer in a house, a watch he later gives away to another service-man. This is not an act of avarice or greed; the objects taken are of little consequence. Rather, the looting seems to be a kneejerk reaction in response to the sudden jolt of fear caused by the exploding mine. As Alan puts it: they are not 'bad boys'. But they are young men immersed in a situation where normal rules have ceased to apply.

As the last vestiges of German resistance turn to surrender, the American regiments are deployed in strategic missions attempting to curtail the Russian army from advancing territorial claims. After such a mission in Czechoslovakia the company soldiers are bestowed the honour of a photo opportunity with a general. The impromptu photo opportunity appears to be an informal occasion by military standards, and only the stripes on jacket sleeves which mark rank distinguish the otherwise identical looking men from one another as the soldiers line up. Due to a mix-up Alan ends up receiving somebody else's photograph as a keepsake. On the following page the photograph, 'of a corporal who isn't Cope, shaking the hand of a general who isn't Patton' has been reproduced by Guibert's hand². What we are shown, is that even without an accompanying text or caption performing what according to Barthes' can be described as *anchorage*, or 'an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion' (Berger and Mohr, 1995: 91) photographs are accepted, expected and assumed to possess evidential power. As in the case of Alan's photograph this lends itself to

² The photograph itself can be found among the 'photographic memories' in the very last section of the book which allows the reader access to some of the reference material used by Guibert for his drawing.

misidentification. Tagg (1988: 5-8, 60- 102) describes the fast assimilation of photography as evidence in law and as a means of surveillance and for the establishment of systematic records. This *'turning real lives into writing'* has a function of objectification and subjection. As with the photograph of the soldier and the general, documents and archives take on a life of their own and become producers of history, while their evidential status may be asymmetrically related to their correspondence to the events they represent.

Material keepsakes (more so than photographs perhaps) are potent symbolic carriers of remembrance, tangible, physical evidence of experiences which are inexplicable, unspeakable, and untranslatable when soldiers return home. Alan is given a German revolver, originally taken from a dead officer by one of his fellow soldiers, and is pleased to have it as a souvenir. But returning to the US as a civilian after the war, he is stopped at customs who intend to confiscate his keepsake. Alan and several others in the same situation throw their German handguns into the sea in a small, but symbolically significant, gesture of defiance. As he explains, they *'threw [their] weapons into the sea rather than give them to customs'* (147: 6).

This makes another poignant comment on the conflicted relationship between military service and personal experience and sacrifice; between acquiescence and resistance. Ultimately these war-time realities are encountered, suffered and inflicted under the authority of distant strategists and policy-makers. But it is as though the returning soldiers feel that these souvenirs represent their personal experiences, and thus something which the state machinery is not entitled to.

'The individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others. Its bravery or its strength are no longer the principal variables that define it; but the place it occupies, the interval it covers, the regularity, the good order according to which it operates its movements. The soldier is above all a fragment of mobile space, before he is courage or honour.'

(Foucault , 1977: 164)

The young G.I.'s experience of war is one dominated not by fierce battle but auxiliary deployments, the strategic importance and aims of which often remain hazy to the men in the platoon. Instead interpersonal relationships, chance encounters and incidents form the thread of the narrative.

Small scale and mundane turns and events are recollected with clarity and given a central role, thus undermining the mythology of heroic warfare as a dramatic event. The over-riding impression we are left with, is that neither official versions which go down as history nor their dramatisation in the

form of heroic battles and sacrifice in literature and the movies, bear much resemblance to Alan's experience.

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